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Obituary

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Professor Richard Allsopp, January 23, 1923 – June 3, 2009

Professor Stanley Reginald Richard Allsopp, CHB, PhD, retired Reader and Honorary Professor of Caribbean Lexicography at the University of the West Indies, died on June 3, 2009, aged 86.



Professor Stanley Reginald Richard Allsopp

Stanley Reginald Richard Allsopp's magnum opus is, of course, the Dictionary of Caribbean English. His greatest invention was the Caribbean Lexicography Project through which he laboured for a quarter of a century, learning Twi, Hindi and Portuguese; visiting 18 countries; interviewing thousands of persons and convening countless seminars and workshops so as to establish the Dictionary on an empirical evidential foundation. In the final analysis, the Dictionary became, possibly, "the most important book ever to come out of the Anglophone Caribbean" and it was well worth the twenty-five-year wait.

To all Guyanese, Richard Allsopp was the man who understood the importance of recognising the inevitability of employing everyday expressions – such as cut-eye, hard-ears, eye-pass and suck-teeth – and exotic words such as braiga, bhagwat, masjid, mati, polder, stelling and warishi, which form part of speech and without which ordinary communication would be cumbersome. He asked himself the most serious questions about language such as what is the correct 'national' way to write or speak and on what grounds should local names be

accepted or rejected.

In answering questions like these, Allsopp gave Caribbean lexicography a special personality and put it on the world stage. For much longer than ordinary people would care to work on a financially unrewarding venture, he applied his considerable intellect to that task. He made the point that "The weight of evidence supplied in this work should provide sufficient ground to build Caribbean pride to replace the earlier colonial shamefacedness and inhibitions bedeviling the region." The Dictionary, which marked the culmination of years of painstaking research, will remain one of the most significant landmarks in Caribbean linguistics and as an invaluable resource for many future generations.

For good reason, therefore, Richard Allsopp has become widely respected and will be long remembered as the region's pioneering and most prominent lexicographer. He was a member of the small group of scholars who came together fifty years ago at the first international conference on Creole languages held at Mona, Jamaica and he never faltered. His vision of the importance of language was always clear but his interest became more intense in the era of independence and regional integration. His efforts always seemed to be part of a grand scheme which was fulfilled in the Dictionary.

His academic career and the various positions he held – Lecturer, Senior Lecturer, Reader and Senior Research Fellow, Vice-Dean (Campus Dean) and Public Orator – at Cave Hill testify to the tenacity of his commitment and the clarity of his vision. He started as French Language Tutor in UWI's Extra-Mural Department in Georgetown in 1948, and although officially retired, was appointed Honorary Research Fellow and Director-Coordinator of the Caribbean Lexicography Project on the Cave Hill campus.

After graduating from university, he returned to Queen's as a master and, along with James Cameron-Tudor, launched the QC Lictor as a topical trimestral newspaper in 1950. He served as senior master and deputy principal of Queen's College, then one of the most prestigious secondary schools in the Caribbean, in the 1950s and early 1960s. It was after the departure of the British-born principal Vivyan Sanger-Davies when, having already acquired his doctorate and acting as headmaster, that he felt obliged to leave Guyana.

He complained that "The standards to which my generation of school-educated persons was accustomed were high and, in my position, I strove to maintain such standards. Not only did I find that I was fighting a losing battle in that regard, but racial and political divisions had become patent in my staff-room and were evidenced in my school." He had learnt that politics was more powerful than professionalism and, two years later when Prime Minister Forbes Burnham invited him to become Vice-Chancellor of the University of Guyana, he decided to let this cup pass and settle for Barbados.

He took up the position of Lecturer in English at the newly-established College of Arts and Science in Barbados which was soon to become UWI's Cave Hill campus in 1963. There he was responsible for the introduction of linguistics and continued to design and teach linguistics courses, including a graduate course in Caribbean Lexicography, until 1995. He was also head of English and Chairman of the Language and Linguistics Unit, Chairman of Survey Courses and Social Sciences, Designer and Moderator of Use of English and other courses in English, and Vice-Dean of the College.

Evidence of Allsopp's pioneering role in Caribbean linguistics is apparent from the content of his conference papers during the 1970s and 1980s. He authored scores of scholarly papers in professional journals and chapters in books. Some of these were 'The English Language in British Guiana'; 'The problem of acceptability in Caribbean creolised English'; 'The case for Afrogenesis'; 'Africanisms in the idiom of Caribbean English'; and 'Caribbean English and our schools.'

Allsopp was the first scholar to identify how, in Caribbean English, pitch, stress and tone are used uniquely to distinguish meaning. He was able to find that many errors in students' writing derived from the stress and tonal characteristics of their speech. In the field of Creole linguistics, he emphasised the formative influence of the underlying grammar and idiom of African languages – establishing historical evidence of what thereafter came to be known as the Afrogenesis of Atlantic Creoles. Indeed, it was in a paper that he presented at the Conference of the Society for Caribbean Linguistics in 1976 that the use of the term Afrogenesis was first recorded. He was also one of the first to argue strongly for recognition of Caribbean standards in English, particularly with regard to the lexicon.

As his work came to be better known, he was called increasingly to serve in international consultancies: on the World Bank Education Project; as the English Language Consultant on New Liturgy of the Church of the West Indies; and on boards of the New Oxford English Dictionary, the World Book Dictionary and the Collins Dictionary. He was, in fact, the only West Indian to be appointed to the board of the New Oxford English Dictionary.

Allsopp took a Bachelor of Arts Honours in French, then a Diploma in Education, at the University of London. He returned home in 1948, and was appointed Senior French Master, then acting headmaster at Queen's College, until 1963. His University of London MA dissertation 'Pronominal forms in the dialect of English used in Georgetown (British Guiana) and its environs by persons engaged in non-clerical occupations' in 1958 and his PhD dissertation, *The Verbal Piece in Guyana Creole* in 1961 can be considered the foundations on which the monumental Dictionary was eventually constructed. His other books include *Guyana Talk*; *Dictionary of Caribbean Regional English, Language and National Unity* and, *A Book of Afric Caribbean Proverbs*.

Despite his differences with his former classmate, he acknowledged that "The late Forbes Burnham of Guyana independently saw the value of the work as an instrument of integrative regional education and offered the support of both the Government and the University Guyana. That Government's unconditional support, totaling over US\$100,000 in the five years 1975-1980, made possible the bulk of data collection on location throughout the region so giving a solid base to the work."

Richard Allsopp was born on January 23, 1923 in Georgetown, the eldest of four sons of Stanley, and his wife Eloïse, Allsopp. His siblings were Philip and Herbert who became distinguished Guyanese public servants, and Howard who died in adolescence. He grew up in Howes Street, Charlestown, one of the city's poorer and more crowded wards, and attended the nearby St Stephen's Church of Scotland School although his family worshipped at the St Philip's Anglican Church.

He won a Blair Scholarship to attend Queen's College in 1936 where, as a member of Percival house, he had an excellent scholastic career, winning prizes consistently every year from 1938 to 1942. He served as a prefect and as a member of the QC Cadet Corps, but had little talent for sports. He took the Oxford and Cambridge School Certificate Examination in 1939 and, despite earning a distinction in French at the London University Higher certificate ('A' level) in 1941, was outclassed in the contest for the sole Guiana Scholarship by his classmate Forbes Burnham.

In his later years, he received several awards in recognition of his service to education. The citation on the occasion of the award of the Honorary Doctorate of Letters, UWI, Cave Hill, at the Graduation Ceremony, read warmly:

Stanley Reginald Richard Allsopp has towered over Caribbean speech for 40 years – listening, questioning and mimicking everything said by six million people of the English speaking Caribbean – in Guyanese accent, Bajan accent or "Jamaica talk" – as he is equally accomplished in all.

He had been awarded the Crane Gold Medal in Guyana in 1958 for his significant contribution to education, one of only two persons so honoured. He was named Cave Hill's Humanities Scholar of the Year in 1994 and, in 1998, was awarded the Guyana Prize for Literature (a Special Award). The Society for Caribbean Linguistics, of which he had been a founding member, publicly acknowledged his outstanding contribution by electing him its second president in 1974 and making him an Honorary Life Member in 1994. He received the national award Companion of Honour of Barbados in 2004.

Richard Allsopp married first, Joy née Small and together they adopted a daughter, Disa. The marriage was dissolved and he then married Dorothy, née Bell, with whom he had two children, John and Sophia. He married a third time and his wife Jeanette, née Mercurius, and his children survive him.

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