

LIONEL BILLOWS (1909–2004): IN MEMORIAM

Richard Smith

Lionel Billows, who died earlier this year at the age of ninety-four, was a pioneer of what came to be known as ‘situational language teaching’, the mainstream approach which preceded communicative language teaching in the British ELT tradition. He was best-known for his book *Techniques of Language Teaching* (1961), whose humanism and continuing interest value Maley (2001) has recently highlighted. Billows’ most notable practical achievement was his work as Education Officer for the British Council in South India between 1954 and 1960, when he conceived and initially directed a ‘campaign’ for the wholesale retraining of 28,000 Primary School teachers. This project has entered ELT mythology as the ‘Madras Snowball’, due to an article by Billows’ successor which unaccountably fails to mention his contribution (Smith 1962), but Billows himself disliked the term, preferring to call it instead the ‘MELT (Madras English Language Teaching) Campaign’.

Billows had an establishment upbringing, attending private schools, graduating from Cambridge (with a degree in history, in 1932) and spending two years in the army prior to finding work as a teacher of English and History in preparatory schools. However, he had a strong social conscience, as was shown by his decision to go to Germany in 1938 to start a school for Jews who were hoping to emigrate. While awaiting approval for the project (which was not, in the end, granted), he began to teach English as a foreign language. He returned to England shortly before the outbreak of war to accept an appointment with the British Council, which was just then beginning to expand its operations. He was to remain on the Council staff for the next twenty-six years, mostly as a teacher and teacher trainer, but also with important administrative responsibilities.

During the early part of the war Billows worked (in rapid succession) in Estonia, Egypt, and Cyprus, where he was given the responsibility of setting up a new British Institute, in Larnaca. He spent most of the rest of the war (1941–4) in Turkey. Here he was made Director of the British Council Centre in Bursa, a position which involved intensive teaching work, visiting schools in the city and neighbourhood in the mornings, teaching executives in a factory in the afternoons and running evening

classes at the adult education centre in the evenings. He saw out the rest of the war as a Lecturer in the American University, Beirut.

For the next two years (1946–8) Billows was given the task of opening a new British Council office in Zürich, Switzerland (the office was soon afterwards closed, despite a strongly worded protest from the eminent psychologist C.G. Jung). He then returned to Turkey, as Director of Studies for British Council evening classes in Ankara, but also in a new capacity as teacher trainer, at the prestigious Gazi [Teacher] Training Institute in the same city, where he was guided by E.V. Gatenby – an ELT pioneer of a slightly older generation who had himself been inspired by Harold Palmer’s work with teachers in Japan. As a ‘Travelling Teacher Trainer’, originally sent out to visit only the graduates of the Gazi Institute, Billows gradually extended his work to cover the teaching of English in all schools in the area, and the Ministry of Education made him an official inspector. This itinerant experience was to serve him in good stead when in 1952 there was another change of scene, involving a transfer to Saidapet Teachers’ College in the southern Indian state of Madras. From this base he demonstrated methods of teaching in all fifteen of the training colleges in the state for two years. Then, having been made British Council Education Officer for the whole of southern India, he experimented with various types of short course for the further training of teachers. This led to a commission from the Minister of Education of Madras State to prepare for the introduction of English into all Primary Schools. Billows planned and put in motion a campaign by which 28,000 Primary School teachers were to be trained in active and play-oriented situational methods for the teaching of English by 8,000 Secondary School teachers, themselves trained by a small cadre of senior staff, making for a planned total of 36,000 teachers to be inducted into the new approach. Although this campaign was completed within three years as planned, a continuation was institutionalized in Bangalore for the whole of South India. The effects of Billows’ innovative ‘MELT’ campaign in spreading awareness of what came to be known as ‘Structural-Oral-Situational’ methodology were long-lasting, even if criticisable with hindsight for their overall inappropriateness (Prabhu 1987: 10–11). Indeed, MELT was the main precursor of the ‘cascade training’ model which continues to inform British Council work to this day. It is easy to dismiss the ‘Snowball’ as an essentially top-down neo-colonial project (see Pennycook 1994: 151), but Madras State sponsorship of the project, the lack of support given to it by other British Council representatives in its first year, and

Billows' own humanistic view that 'success would be dependent on the process being an organic, co-operative growth and not just a filling up of empty receptacles' all need to be balanced in the equation. 'MELT', in his own conception, was as much about helping to 'melt communal, religious and racist barriers of prejudice' as spreading a new methodology, and, as he emphasised, 'snowballs seemed out of place there'.

To his own great regret, Billows was not able to see through the retraining work in India to its completion, since in 1960 he was summoned back to London to be Head of the British Council's English Language Training Section. Just as summarily, however, he was soon sent off again, this time to Makerere University in East Africa, apparently to act as a counter-balance to growing American influence in the region. In the meantime his post in London had been abolished. There then ensued a number of short-term teacher-training and report-writing assignments, in Germany, Poland, the Sudan, and Rhodesia, until in 1964 he was made English Language Officer for Germany. One year later, he was again informed that he was to be transferred, this time to Persia, but Billows had by now had enough of British Council short-termism. He resigned and took up an offer to be head of the University of Makerere Language Methods Department, to which he had previously been attached. Initially he was responsible only for the training of teachers of English, of whom half were students from the UK, but during his time there (1966–70) he also introduced Swahili, Luganda, French and German into the curriculum, taking personal responsibility for the latter two languages. He became Dean of the Faculty of Education, and was a member of the Survey Committee of the Survey of Language Use and Teaching in Eastern Africa sponsored by the Ford Foundation.

From 1970 onwards Billows taught at various universities in Germany, ending up as a full Professor in the Faculty of Education, University of Erlangen-Nürnberg, where he was based from 1975 until his retirement in 1979. He continued to live in Germany until his death earlier this year.

Sources: Unpublished autobiographical typescripts in the personal files of the Billows family. I am grateful to Lionel Billows' widow and son for allowing me to refer to these documents, which have been placed in the University of Warwick ELT Archive (http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/celte/research/elt_archive/).

References

- Billows, F.L.** 1961. *The Techniques of Language Teaching*. London: Longmans. To be reprinted in
Smith, R.C. (ed.). Forthcoming. *Teaching English as a Foreign Language, 1936–1961: Foundations of ELT*, Volume 6. London: Routledge.
- Maley, A.** 2001. 'A matter of time'. *English Teaching Professional* 18 (January 2001): 5–9.
- Pennycook, A.** 1994. *The Cultural Politics of English as an International Language*. Harlow: Longman.
- Prabhu, N.S.** 1987. *Second Language Pedagogy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Smith, D.A.** 1962. 'The Madras "Snowball": an attempt to retrain 27,000 teachers of English to beginners'. *English Language Teaching* 17/1: 3–9.

Alan Maley writes:

Lionel Billows was a larger than life character, who lived his life with enormous gusto, enthusiasm and energy, which communicated itself to everyone he came in contact with. It is hardly surprising that a man endowed with such energy and intuitive flair was not always regarded with favour by some of the institutions he worked for. He was not, by nature, an 'organisation man'. He was emphatically his own person, who scorned the bureaucratic trammels he so often encountered. This may account for the relative neglect of his legacy to English Language Teaching.

It is unfortunate that his book, *The Techniques of Language Teaching* has been so long out of print, and very good news that it is soon to be re-published in facsimile format. For those of us who started our careers in the early sixties, it was virtually the only source of sound advice available at the time. And even today, it is a constant surprise to find the seeds of current ideas buried in the practical wisdom of this book.

One of the book's most striking features is its basis in classroom experience. As can be seen from Richard Smith's outline of Lionel's life, he had an enormous breadth of experience, both geographically and in terms of teaching contexts. And one of his most admirable characteristics was his enduring passion for the classroom. I recall him telling me with relish of a 36-hour overnight trip by train from western Germany

to Lvov in the Ukraine to give teacher training workshops ~ and this was while he was in his eighties!

Two qualities stand out in my memory of him. Firstly, his humanity ~ his genuine interest in his students and trainees, and his knack of tapping into their potential, not just as students but as individuals. Secondly, his commitment to education in its broadest sense, not merely the technicity of ELT practice. He was a true educator.

I count myself fortunate to have known Lionel, and to have had intermittent, but always valued, contact with him over recent years. It is a source of great regret to me that his legacy to our profession has not been more widely recognized. We are Lilliputians who walk in his shadow, full of our own importance and supposed originality, and oblivious of the fact that we owe so many of our current ideas to pioneering precursors such as Lionel Billows.