

WIE ES EIGENTLICH GEWESEN: OR, NOTES CONCERNING THE PRE-HISTORY OF THE HENRY SWEET SOCIETY

John L. Flood's generous and sympathetic obituary in the November 1997 *HSS Bulletin* of our beloved friend and colleague Paul Bernard Salmon (1921–1997), for many years the driving force behind this publication, notes that Vivian Salmon had “conceived the idea of founding the Society back in August 1983” as a result of “following up an idea that had surfaced in a conversation with Konrad Koerner”. My role in the matter having been invoked, I hope it is not out of place for me to expand a bit on Professor Flood's remark, which I wish to do for three reasons. The first is to put it definitively on record that Vivian Salmon is indeed THE founder member of the Society and in my view its very soul for many years, something she herself will be too self-effacing to acknowledge.¹ The second is to clarify the nature of my involvement, which although quite modest in practical terms — Vivian herself has if anything tended to overcredit it — did go a bit beyond taking part in a single conversation. Lastly, I wish to record some of the details of these events, since it would be most ironic if a Society such as this one lacked a full account of its own history.²

Those present at the general meeting of the first International Conference on the History of the Language Sciences held in Ottawa in August 1978, which included several members of the current Executive Committee and at least three International Committee members of HSS, may recall that it had been my intention to get an International Society for the History of the Language Sciences started right there. It was not to be, for a variety of reasons, including an Air Canada strike that caused a number of participants to make alternative travel arrangements which resulted in their departure before the general meeting, unfortunately scheduled for the last day of the Conference, had ended, something which led to the majority view of those remaining that we did no longer have a quorum for a vote on this proposal. The result was that the Société d'Histoire et d'Épistémologie des Sciences du Langage (S.H.E.S.L.), launched by Sylvain Auroux, then attached as a researcher of the CNRS to the University of Lille III, in March 1978, in anticipation of ICHoLS I, remained the sole scholarly association for parties interested in the history of linguistics for many years thereafter. Nor was sufficient opportunity afforded

¹ It is in this sense that I endorse Giulio Lepschy's recent statement that “the Henry Sweet Society for the History of Linguistic Ideas” was “founded in 1984 on the initiative of Vivian Salmon” (Lepschy 1998: xv).

² In “A Note on the Foundation of the Society” in Issue No.1 of the *Henry Sweet Society Newsletter* (April 1984), signed by Leslie Sciffert and Vivian Salmon, we are simply told (p. 1): “After informal contacts and meetings in Oxford, a group of scholars from various disciplines has agreed that it is appropriate to inaugurate in Britain a society to bring together persons with a professional interest in the history of linguistic ideas.”

for considering the founding of an international society at the subsequent meeting held in Lille in September 1981.

As we were left, ten years after the launching of *Historiographia Linguistica* and five years after ICHoLS I, with but one association for the History of the Language Sciences (henceforth: HoLS), and a French-speaking one at that which definitely could not serve all interested parties adequately, it occurred to me, in the Spring of 1983 (as my files remind me) that it would be the second-best solution to having an international society to have at least one further society launched — and in Britain, in order to serve a number of colleagues in Europe and in America who are not conversant with French. As I had known Vivian Salmon for some ten years by the time — she had published her first contribution to *HL* in the first volume of the journal and I had met her and her husband more or less by chance in Regensburg in the summer of 1974 at a reception hosted by Herbert Ernst Brekle, to whose chair I had been attached as a *habilitandus* supported by the German Research Foundation — it was natural, given that she and Paul had taken early retirement from the University of Edinburgh in 1981 in order to devote their time and efforts to scholarship, that I should correspond with Vivian on the question of founding a society for HoLS with the seat in Oxford, their new home.³ On 18 August 1983 a group of scholars living in or near Oxford and with an interest in the history of linguistics (broadly defined) were invited by the Salmons to a garden party at their home at 5 Rotha Field Road, Oxford. A photograph I took of all those present in Paul and Vivian's garden that day includes the two ‘immediately recruited’ members of the society-to-be, mentioned by Professor Flood in his fine obituary of Paul Salmon, namely the latter and the late Leslie Sciffert (1934–1990), but also, apart from Vivian Salmon herself, Ian Michael (who had come over from Bristol for this occasion), John C. Marshall from the Radcliffe Infirmary, *la regrettée* Edwina Burness, Christopher J. Wells (St Edmund Hall), Terence F. Hoad (St Peter's College), and Dominik Wujastyk from the London-based Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine.⁴

Vivian's own account of this meeting has been published, but in a book which appears not to have had wide circulation — as it happens the publisher of the little *Festschrift* (Cowan & Foster 1989) called me recently to tell me that he still had many copies of it taking up space in his basement. As a result, I take the liberty of quoting her narrative at length:

³ I may add that I had been a Fellow at the Institute of Advanced Studies in the Humanities of the University of Edinburgh during the summer of 1977, and so was able to meet the Salmons again and indeed come to know them much better than from previous chance encounters.

⁴ All but Dr Marshall joined the Society when it was launched several months later and are duly identified as Founder Members in the first *HSS Newsletter* (April 1984), 5–11.

[...] For personal reasons, I was unable to attend the International Conference on the History of the Language Sciences which Konrad organized in Ottawa in 1978, or indeed any of the other conferences in this series; and so my next meeting with Konrad was only in August 1983, when he visited Oxford [...]. I took the opportunity to invite several friends, interested in linguistics even if only marginally in the history of the discipline, to meet him; and on the afternoon of August 18, 1983, on a blazing hot summer day, we assembled in the garden of my house in Oxford to discuss our common interests, and, in particular ways of persuading our colleagues and pupils to take an interest in the history of their subject. From this meeting arose the suggestion of establishing a society, which would help to bring together scholars working in the history of linguistics in various locations, and often feeling very isolated. The hope was that we could set up a base somewhere which would be attractive to scholars in the UK and abroad; although Konrad himself had nothing more to do with the organization of such a society, scholars present on that occasion continued to discuss the possibility, and eventually met again, with a larger group of colleagues, in February 1984. It was then agreed that Oxford would provide a suitable location, that we should publish a *Newsletter*, and hold regular conferences. We also agreed to obtain a financial basis for the society by inviting contributions by founding members, and Konrad became one of the first of these. We also agreed to name the society in honour of the great Oxford linguist, Henry Sweet, as a small tribute to a scholar who did not meet with the appreciation which he deserved in his own lifetime. Although, therefore, the Henry Sweet Society became established in Oxford for practical reasons, it is possible that a society would never have been established at all if it had not been for the inspiration offered by Konrad's visit to Oxford in August 1983.

[...]

To Konrad Koerner must go, therefore, the credit for not only inaugurating *Historiographia Linguistica* and the "Amsterdam Studies in the Theory and History of Linguistic Science", but also for acting as a catalyst which led to the founding of the Henry Sweet Society, and no doubt a large amount of the credit for the establishment of its sister North American Society. It is impossible to think of anybody who can have done more to establish the History of the Language Sciences as an independent and flourishing discipline. (Salmon 1989:75-76)

I really doubt that much needs to be added to Vivian Salmon's testimony. My own perspective differs on a few details only, beginning with the credit given to my 'inspiration', which Vivian has kindly exaggerated here for a text written in my honour, as she would do in her remarks on the society's founding at the General Meeting of ICHoLS VII held at Keble College, Oxford, in September 1996.

Another small point is that in my 'speech' to those gathered in Vivian and Paul's garden on 18 August 1983, I suggested four things, three of them mentioned in Vivian's account: the establishment of a society for HoL(S), the publication of a newsletter, the holding of meetings, and, something which was

only realized a couple of years ago in another form, the creation of a monograph series by HSS members. Indeed, I still have a thick file on the subject which tells me that Vivian Salmon, from the beginning and for many years thereafter the Honorary Secretary of HSS, and I had many exchanges on this proposal to establish a monograph series within the already operative "Studies in the History of the Language Sciences" series (published by John Benjamins since 1973) during the mid-1980s. For reasons I never quite understood, because the idea was to offer HSS members a considerable rebate on those books and possibly others in HoLS as well and quite attractive in my opinion, this proposal went nowhere, despite several moves by Vivian to get it off the ground.

While it is true that, officially, I had nothing more to do with the society's organization after this meeting, I undertook a series of visits in its immediate aftermath to spread the word about the society and encourage other scholars to take an interest. After that informal meeting I recall, in chronological order, having made an appointment with D. Ellis Evans, the Jesus Professor of Celtic, who was unable to attend and had written me a personal note of apology, and going to see Roy Harris, then the holder of the Chair of General Linguistics at Oxford in his rather spartan office at Worcester College the next morning, in an effort to get their support for a HoL society. (If I remember correctly, Anna Morpurgo Davies was still away in Italy where I understand she usually spends her summers, but since I had talked to her at some length in her office at Somerville College back in April 1975 about our mutual interests in the history of linguistics, I could be sure of her support for any such endeavour.) I also took a train to London to meet my intellectual grandfather, R. H. Robins (who was my *Doktorvater* Geoffrey L. Bursill-Hall's thesis director) and Thea and Jim Bynon at the School of Oriental and African Studies for the same reason. How much impetus, if any, these private meetings gave to the eventual formation of the Society six months later is impossible to say, but I do not wish it thought that I simply led the garden party up the garden path with my proposals and left them to fend for themselves, without my making any further efforts to ensure a successful outcome.

Finally, although my recollection is not complete on this point, I must deny having had any part in the choice of the Society's name: more likely, if an Oxford name was to be chosen at all (I'm generally against such custom unless a person has bequeathed a significant amount of money or other tangible matter in support of an institute or for an endowment) I might have thought of Oxford and Max Müller rather than Henry Sweet (who spent only a few years there and not fifty-five rather productive years like Müller), and at least some HSS members may forgive me for saying that I just cannot warm to the idea that we all are interested in "the history of linguistic *ideas*" only and not also in investigating the linguistic *practice* of past authors.

Since the late 1980s a number of other national societies have been founded that are devoted to linguistic historiography in one form or another with an international appeal and the regular participation of scholars from abroad in their meetings (in Germany, North America, The Netherlands, Italy, Spain, and probably other places that have not yet come to my attention). I now think that these associations together make up amply for our failure to establish an international society; indeed, whenever an ICHoLS meeting is held, I'm inclined to believe that we all feel very much *en famille*, something we should all be happy about.

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A NOTE ON THE ORIGINS OF THE HENRY SWEET SOCIETY

Konrad Koerner's account of the pre-history of the Henry Sweet Society ends with his personal involvement at the meeting he describes in Oxford, and with his further attempts to obtain support from academic colleagues; a brief account of the remainder of the pre-history of the Society may be appropriate here, especially for those members of the Society who have recently joined and who have not seen the earlier brief account in *Newsletter 1*.

At the meeting in August 1983 it was agreed to explore the likelihood of support for such a society in the English-speaking world, which was the major target. The ad hoc secretary circulated all those linguists, and some others, who she believed might be interested, and she was very gratified with the responses—all were favourable, and many, indeed, enthusiastic, and several became founder-members, helping to fund the administrative expenses with generous loans. Another ad hoc meeting was held in January 1984 at which it was agreed that there was sufficient support to call a formal meeting. This also was held at 5 Rotha Field Road, and attracted linguists from far afield.

The first task of this meeting was to draw up a constitution, and the first elections, by those present, were of Professor R.H. Robins as President and Professor Ian Michael as Vice President; next was the election of the late Leslie Seiffert as Chairman of the Executive Committee, of Vivian Salmon as Hon. Secretary, John Flood as Treasurer, and David Cram as Editor of the proposed Newsletter.

The next task was to find a name for the Society which should be as inclusive as possible, while making clear that this was an organisation directed at the English-speaking world, and should be concerned with theoretical as well as practical issues. Many names were suggested, among them Müller's, but it was generally agreed that the name of Henry Sweet would be most appropriate. He was a British scholar, known to linguists throughout the world, concerned with both the theoretical and the practical study of language. It was also a minor element in his support that to name our society after him would perhaps be a small recognition of his distinction, which was not always recognised in Oxford in his lifetime. As it happens, Sweet's grave in Wolvercote cemetery is less than half an hour's walk from Rotha Field Road. During conferences members often make a pilgrimage to the grave which is regularly planted with flowers on behalf of the Society.

With the establishment of the Society, the next task was to plan for our first conference. There was no difficulty in obtaining offers of papers, and it was a proud day for the Committee when the conference opened in St Peter's College, Oxford, in September 1984 with a paper from Mike MacMahon on the

work of Sweet. It was also very gratifying that Sweet's nearest surviving relative, a great-nephew, was able to be present on that day.

Many other projects were still in the future, including the establishment of a Henry Sweet library at Keble College (where the Hon. Sec. was at that time a Lecturer) by kind permission of the Warden, Sir Christopher Bull, himself a scholar specialising in the history of the English language. Keble was also generous enough to offer accommodation at the College for members of the Society visiting Oxford to work in our library or elsewhere, and many members have taken advantage of this privilege. Other projects included the establishment of a series of monographs, the first attempts failing because the Society did not have the funds at the time to support publication.

Regular annual conferences have, of course, continued, with the proviso that in years when ICHOLS meet there is only a one-day conference in the UK. This is held in London, at Senate House—a more convenient venue for those coming from abroad for a brief visit than either Oxford or Cambridge.

The Henry Sweet Society is now only one of a number of relevant societies; several were founded after 1984 but, until the North American Society was founded, it remained the only one directed at the English-speaking world.

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