

## Robert Anderson Hall, Jr.

*April 4, 1911 — December 2, 1997*

Robert A. Hall, Jr., world-renowned specialist in Romance linguistics, one of the early representatives of American structuralism and descriptive linguistics, and one of the founders of the Division of Modern Languages at Cornell, died on December 2, 1997, at the age of 86. He is survived by his wife, Alice M. Colby-Hall; his three children, Philip A. Hall, Diana K. Goodall, and Caroline Erickson; six grandchildren; and six great-grandchildren.

Although he was born in Raleigh, North Carolina (April 4, 1911), he spent most of his childhood in the north, first in Minnesota, then in New England. He received his higher education at Princeton University, the University of Chicago, and the University of Rome. At Princeton (B.A. 1931) he majored in French and German literature. He became acquainted with the budding discipline of linguistics when he began his graduate studies at Chicago that year, taking courses with Harry Hoiyer and later with Leonard Bloomfield. He continued his studies in literature and expanded his studies in the classical Indo-European languages (Greek, Latin, Sanskrit, Avestan, Old Persian) with Carl Darling Buck and George Bobrinskoy.

He interrupted his graduate work at Chicago by going to Italy, where he studied Italian literature and historical linguistics, the latter in a European version whose distortion of neo-grammarians theory he was critical of throughout his scholarly career. He received the Dottore in Lettere from the University of Rome in 1934. He finished up the few remaining requirements for the M.A. degree upon his return to Chicago in 1935 and did further course work, but, having received what he considered to be the equivalent of the Ph.D. degree from Rome, chose not to pursue that degree at Chicago.

In 1936, he married Frances L. Adkins, with whom he later collaborated on the preparation of materials for the teaching of reading and writing to English-speaking children and on an Italian-English and English-Italian dictionary of idioms. In that same year, he got his first academic job teaching at the University of Puerto Rico. While there, he worked on the rewriting of a Hungarian grammar and started work on his *Bibliography of Italian Linguistics*. In 1939, he obtained an instructorship at Princeton, and in 1940, began teaching Italian language and literature at Brown where his acquaintance with Hans Kurath and Bernard Bloch further stimulated his interest in linguistics. In the following year, he was elected to the editorial board of the *Linguistic Society of America*. That was also the year in which Leonard Bloomfield moved to neighboring Yale, whose Linguistics Club served both Yale and Brown.

It was during this first decade of his scholarly life that Bob Hall began his many disputes with a number of European scholars. He developed what can only be called an antipathy toward a European style of academic behavior. He has sharp words in his memoirs for the prideful arrogance of some. He hated pretension and had none of his own. But this did not affect his love for Europe, European tradition, and respect for many European scholars, thus freeing him, in the eyes of at least some, from the charge of bias and prejudice. In fact, he characterized some of his American colleagues' reaction to the influx of European scholars into the U.S. in the 1930s and 1940s as "xenophobic". Like H.L. Mencken and others of an earlier day, he was in the habit of identifying people by their ethnic or cultural background, and he was accused of bias against one nationality or another, but judging from the language of his memoirs, no nationality was spared. In speaking of Professor Jakob Jud, whom he met in Zurich, he says, "He was a fine, honorable, upright gentleman, far above the petty quarrelling of the Italians and equally far removed from the grandiose but empty verbiage of many of the Germans". He was not impressed by those Europeans who insisted on "the inherent superiority of European culture", because, he says, "My parents and, indeed, our whole culture had always taught me that people coming to America and settling permanently owed it to themselves and their adopted country to discard older customs or attitudes which might conflict with those prevailing in their new home-land"—a stance he never retreated from and one which would not endear him to the modern multiculturalist.

Bob Hall shared with Bloomfield and many other American linguists a dislike of academic "schools" of thought, with their gurus and sycophants, dogmas, and unwillingness to entertain opposing viewpoints. This is certainly one of the many sources of Hall's antipathy to Chomskyan linguistics. Nevertheless, he always treated people with whom he disagreed with utmost civility and never allowed his scholarly predisposition to interfere with respectful treatment of students holding differing views. In his later career at Cornell, for example, he served as chairman of graduate examination committees of students whose theses were written on generative principles; his attitude toward prospective scholars was that all they had to do was to demonstrate competence in their research, no matter what linguistic theory they were operating under.

World War II entailed a need for language teaching research and research on the structure of many of the world's languages, and that need was met in part by the cooperation of the Linguistic Society of America with the American Council of Learned Societies to develop such materials. Hall's first significant contribution in this effort was the description and teaching of Melanesian Pidgin, later in Haitian Creole and Taki-Taki. Hall was a pioneer in the

study of Creoles and pidgins, in devising orthographies for them, and in attempting, particularly in Australia, to convince politicians that Pidgin was a language in its own right and should not be stamped out.

In 1943, Hall went to Washington to work in the U.S. Armed Forces Institute (USAFI), where he joined in the production of textbooks on French, Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese, 4 of the 50-odd language textbooks of the Spoken Language series, a project that effected a significant change in the teaching of languages in this country by emphasizing the spoken language and by introducing linguistic principles into pedagogy. He also worked in the ASTP (Armed Services Training Program). During the war years, Bob Hall became more closely acquainted with many of the figures who were or would become prominent in the field of linguistics—Leonard Bloomfield, Edgar Sturtevant, Franklin Edgerton, Isadore Dyen, George Trager, Bernard Bloch, and many others.

It was during these years also that he got to know many of his future colleagues at Cornell, where he went in 1946 at the invitation of J Milton Cowan to join Charles F. Hockett, Frederick B. Agard, Gordon H. Fairbanks, and in 1947, William G. Moulton, in the founding of an academic unit—the Division of Modern Languages—which would introduce the new approaches to language teaching into the academic world, along with the then novel discipline of linguistics. There he spent the rest of his life of scholarship and teaching, both of which he found gratifying.

In 1975, he retired from teaching, becoming Professor Emeritus of Linguistics and Italian, but continued his research as actively as ever. He was then in the midst of working on his *Comparative Romance Grammar*. In that year, his wife Frances died. He subsequently married Alice M. Colby-Hall, Professor of Romance Studies.

For most of his life he believed—naïvely, he would himself confess—that the academic world was the rare place one could express one's views freely, however unwelcome they may be, without untoward consequences of the sort one might encounter in normal life. At one point toward the end of his academic career, he expressed politically incorrect views on the Holocaust. Although this was in fact a demonstration of his strict adherence to an unprejudiced scholarly approach to any matter to which he turned his attention, his interdisciplinary conversation companions at the faculty cafeteria excluded him from their luncheon table, and generally shunned him thereafter, much to his distress.

Robert A. Hall, Jr. is remembered by the colleagues of his that remain among the living as an incredibly prolific writer on a wide variety of topics. One can recall him back in the 1950s in a corner of the hectic main office of the department busily typing away on one of his books during the 10-minute breaks between classes of the 5 courses

he normally taught per semester, using the only departmental typewriter that had the proper array of phonetic symbols for his purposes.

He published over fifty books and over five hundred and fifty articles and reviews in learned journals on: structural linguistics; the history of American Linguistics; graphemics; the application of linguistics to language teaching; Italian linguistics; the history of Italian literature; the life and works of Antonio Fogazzaro; Pidgin and Creole languages; the external history of the Romance languages; proto-Romance phonology and morphology; English linguistics; Hungarian grammar; cultural symbolism in literature; and the genuineness of the Kensington runestone. He also wrote fiction, and composed some music, for his own amusement and was a prolific contributor to the Letters to the Editor department of various newspapers.

Bob Hall's sense of humor ran to puns, limericks, the apt quotation (often in Latin), and an appreciation of the work of P.G. Wodehouse, on whose comic style he wrote a book appreciated in turn by Wodehouse himself. He took delight in Wodehousean phrases such as "His finely-chiselled features were twisted with agony and what not". He was as serious about his avocations as he was about his profession. In addition to his book and articles on Wodehouse, he traveled the world over to ride trolleys and trains, keeping close track of train schedules and writing pieces on electric railways. In addition to singing in various local choral groups, he was an extremely knowledgeable listener and wrote a number of pieces on music, including a demonstration that the origin of the term *tierce de Picardie* had nothing to do with Picardy.

His writings include much of what might be called popularizing, though for him, writing for non-academic audiences was very much a duty. In his book, *Leave Your Language Alone*, an attack on correctness and normative grammar (although elsewhere he confesses his quickness to correct others' errors in English grammar, and woe betide an interlocutor who failed to pronounce Wodehouse Woodhouse) he has this to say: "The contribution of linguistics is simply a part of the effort of all science in modern democratic society to find out the truth and to act upon it".

Although, while appreciative of good administrators such as J M. Cowan who left him free to pursue his scholarly work, he eschewed administrative work, and he was active in many professional organizations. He served as Vice President of the American Association of Teachers of Italian in 1945, Vice President of the Linguistic Society of America in 1961, President of the Wodehouse Society in 1983-85, and President of the Linguistic Association of Canada and the United States in 1983-84, and in 1984-85. He was a Guggenheim Fellow in 1954 and 1970 and a Fulbright lecturer in linguistics at the University of Rome in 1950-51 and 1957-58. In 1978, he received

a Professional Achievement Award from the University of Chicago, and in 1992, a Distinguished Achievement Award from the Alumni Association of Poly Prep Country Day School in Brooklyn, New York, where he had completed his secondary education in 1927.

Bob Hall felt it his civic duty not only to apply linguistics to social problems, but also to speak out forcefully on other social and political issues. Although usually labeled a conservative (a true characterization in some respects), it would be just as fitting to label him an American socialist, one of his favorite and oft-cited books being Thorstein Veblen's, *Theory of the Leisure Class*. He was a great respecter of tradition and at the same time an ardent iconoclast.

Robert A. Hall, Jr. was an old-fashioned man from his earliest years and clung to ideals that became rather unfashionable in the course of his life (honor, duty, temperance, civility, decency, piety, integrity, intellectual honesty, love of country, and what not). Some found this ridiculous, others admirable.

*Richard L. Leed, Charles F. Hockett*