

J Milton Cowan

February 22, 1907 — December 20, 1993

J Milton Cowan died in Holyoke, Massachusetts from complications following emergency hip-replacement surgery.

He was born in Salt Lake City, Utah. At his birth, his parents, hesitating between the first names James and John, decided to give him neither but to leave the choice for him to make later. In due time he rejected both alternatives; instead, when asked to give his full name, he would regularly cite it as “J, no period, Milton Cowan,” In the years that followed he acquired also a whole string of nicknames, different ones among different circles of friends. To the three of us preparing this memorial he was “Milt” and we shall call him that here.

Milt’s initial education was in his native city’s public schools. Then he proceeded to the University of Utah, where he distinguished himself both as a scholar and as a track-and-field athlete. The former pointed toward his career, but the latter also presaged later activities: he became, in the 1960s, one of the pioneers in scuba diving, and was still going on dives in his eighties. And on July 6, 1992, at age 85, he participated in a competitive 3.1-mile walk, jogging the last mile, and was named Athlete of the Week by radio station WHCU.

Milt’s college career was interrupted so that he could fulfil the duty required of all young Mormon men, to serve a period as a missionary. For this he spent 30 months in Germany in 1928-30, in the process achieving a solid command of German. He was also able to attend some lectures at the University of Leipzig.

Back in Utah, he earned a B.A. degree in 1931 and an M.A. degree in 1932. After a year (1932-33) in the University of California graduate school, he moved to the University of Iowa, where he spent the next decade. It was there that he met, courted, and in 1934 married Theodora (“Ted”) Mary Ronayne, originally of Austin, Texas. His work at the University, as student and as teacher, was in three departments, Psychology, Speech, and German. It was in the first of these that he obtained, in 1935, his Ph.D. degree; the focus of his research was on experimental phonetics, with a thesis on “Pitch, intensity, and rhythmic movements in American dramatic speech.” In 1938, he was elected to Sigma XI. Starting some time before that, and until 1942, he was teaching, eventually in the Department of German; unfortunately, the available record of his appointments and promotions is not entirely clear.

In 1937, Milt joined the Linguistic Society of America. In 1941, he became its secretary-treasurer, a post he held through 1950; in 1966, he was the Society’s president. In 1941, he was chairman of the experimental phonetics section of the Modern Language Association; in 1941-42, a member of the Advisory Board to the journal, *American Speech*; and for many years a fellow of the Acoustical Society of America.

In April of 1942, Milt left Iowa to join the staff of the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS), at that time still in Washington, DC, whence he came to Cornell in 1946 as Professor of Linguistics and Director of the newly established Division of Modern Languages. After his retirement in 1972, he remained in Ithaca, establishing and running a publishing firm, Spoken Language Services.

Milt's coming to Cornell was a direct consequence of his work at the ACLS. Since the mid-1930s, that organization's secretary, F. Mortimer Graves, had recognized that the United States was in sore need of persons with competence in "strategic languages," including many not taught at any college in the country. Even before war broke out in 1939, the ACLS had begun to sponsor a series of pilot courses in some of these languages in its Intensive Language Program. These courses were built on a triad of fundamental principles: (1) the primacy of speech over writing, which means the learner must hear, imitate, and understand native (or near-native) speakers of the target language; (2) intensive concentration—as many hours per day as possible; and (3) guidance by someone trained in linguistic analysis, in order to focus on the real differences between the learner's native language and that being acquired and to avoid the multitudinous time-wasting traps that arise from popular misconceptions about the nature of language. The partly independent work begun somewhat later at "165 Broadway/' as it was familiarly referred to (officially the Language Section, Education Branch, Information and Education Division, Army Service Forces, located in New York City at that address) under Milt's close friend and colleague Henry L. ("Haxie") Smith Jr., was based on the same premisses.

Milt's role in the ACLS was as peripatetic overseer of this enterprise, initially small but very shortly expanded by the military authorities into the large-scale Army Specialized Training Program, involving thousands of soldier-students and many universities. Wherever all three of the principles were followed, these courses were eminently successful.

One of the successful operations was at Cornell, where, in 1944-45, there were Army Specialized Training Program groups in Russian and Italian. Their supervisor was the then Dean of Arts and Sciences, Cornell's Willem ("Dick") De Kiewiet, who had earlier been a colleague of Milt's at Iowa. Impressed by the success of the Army's program, De Kiewiet took advantage of several impending faculty retirements and other campus changes to persuade the Arts College to institute a radical revision of foreign-language teaching, involving an adaptation of the principles of the Intensive Language Program to civilian conditions. Milt came as Director of the newly established Division, and was joined by a number of young linguists experienced in the languages to be taught.

The story of Milt's career at Cornell is the story of the Division of Modern Languages, because upon his retirement the remaining members of the Division took the initiative in changing its official status and its name: with the approval of the College it became, in 1972, the Department of Modern Languages and Linguistics. The details of that story belong elsewhere, but it must be recorded here that under Milt's leadership there took place at Cornell some of the most efficient and effective foreign-language learning ever seen as part of a regular college curriculum (that is, as over against special intensive programs that leave little or no time for anything else). The bulk of this activity was, to be sure, in the handful of Western European languages traditional in American universities. But almost as much effort went to Russian and Chinese, and a good deal even farther afield: in fact, at one time or another instruction was offered in a total of thirty-four different languages.

This effectiveness and diversity led also to many productive collaborations with other organizations. On campus, these were especially with the Literature departments, Far Eastern Studies, and Anthropology. Off campus, there were joint programs with, once again, the ACLS (including the preparation of a series of introductory courses in English for speakers of other languages); with the Language Training Section of the Foreign Service Institute of the Department of State, to which Haxie Smith had moved after the War; and with Standard Oil of Venezuela, Aramco (Arabian-American Oil Company), various National Defense Education Act Institutes, the Ford Foundation, and the Rockefeller Foundation. Various members of the Division, including Milt himself, were from time to time seconded to diverse parts of the world in connection with these cooperative enterprises; in his nonadministrative role in this, Milt became an Arabic expert.

Moreover, in its alter ego as the Field of Linguistics in the Graduate School, Milt's faculty awarded, during his twenty-six years as Director, a total of eighty-eight doctorates, whose recipients now hold positions all over the world.

Milt's role throughout his career—at Cornell and elsewhere—has been aptly characterized as that of an enabler. He was, to be sure, a scholar in his own right, but he published very little. He was also a teacher, and carried a share of the division's teaching load in German and in linguistics. But his great strength lay in having faith in the practical relevance of linguistics, in seeing what needed to be done, in finding people who were eager and able to do it, and in smoothing the way for them. As an administrator he occasionally took it on himself to make an unpopular decision—but usually, in the long run, it turned out to be the right one. He took great pride and joy in the achievements of those about him (including the undersigned), and in response to that we were devoted to his leadership and worked very hard to be worthy of his approval.

After Milt's retirement the newly named Department of Modern Languages and Linguistics carried on for a number of years in much the same spirit. But those years saw a sea-change in the field of linguistics. Milt and his original coworkers had believed firmly not only in the relevance of linguistics for second-language learning but also the reverse—that the practical enterprises of teaching and learning languages can afford valuable insights into the nature of language. The New Wave in linguistics saw no such connection, which meant that there came to be little reason for the two activities to be housed in a single department. These developments saddened Milt considerably: despite his essentially upbeat character, he felt, at times, that a lifetime of effort had been largely wasted.

Yet his own career after retirement from Cornell remained one of service to those in his field. Although Spoken Language Services (his publishing house) supported the preparation of some fine new beginning language courses and issued some important reference works, its main mission was to continue to make available the excellent foreign-language textbooks prepared during the war years under the sponsorship of the ACLS and "165 Broadway"—teaching materials whose quality has rarely been surpassed.

Milt's effectiveness as an enabling administrator was made possible by his remarkably warm and loyal nature. Any friend he made was a friend for life. In 1993, only months before his own death, he flew to California to be present at the memorial service for the just deceased writer Wallace Stegner, whom he had known since school days in Salt Lake City seventy years earlier. And in those same final months he was remarking to some of us that he should get back to Germany to see friends he had made there in the late 1920s; the few who survived were getting pretty old and feeble.

The network of friendships that Milt built around himself over the years was a blessing for the friends. It was also his own safety net, the framework of warm human relationships that more than anything else gave meaning to his life. That became particularly important after the death, in the fall of 1986, of his wife Ted. Happily, the net includes family survivors: son, J (no period!) Ronayne of Urbana, Illinois; son, Bruce Milton of Northampton Massachusetts; daughter, Julia Cowan Spurr of Los Altos, California; and grandchildren, Mitra and Mark of Urbana, Alexander and Julia of Northampton.

R.S. Hall Jr., C.F. Hockett, R.L. Leed