

“A nasal drawl with a kind of bastard cockney intonation”:

What arguments about vowels can tell us about

Australian history

Excerpt 1

[Editorial]

In one of his hours of intellectual recreation – presiding at the speech day of the Methodist Ladies’ College, at the Melbourne Town Hall – Chief Justice Madden took occasion in the course of his address to say that Australians are, in his opinion, cultivating a method of speech which certainly is not pure cultivated English. They are, Sir John Madden says, developing a habit of mispronouncing vowel sounds, which habit, he fears, will, if not grappled with and corrected, give us a linguistic characteristic as marked as the nasal twang of the New Englander. He thinks that it is necessary to warn Australians to give their vowel sounds the full clear voice that the expression of good spoken English requires, and to let their noses have as small a share as possible in the process. We have on several different occasions heard the same thing before, but always took the liberty of strongly doubting whether the new Australian race is developing the linguistic peculiarities of the American Yankee...

... In their heedlessness of correct pronunciation [sic] he states that he has noticed that it is a common failing for young Australians to give to the long sound of the vowel “a,” the sound of “i,” whilst the long sound of “o” becomes “ou.” The average Australian youth, Sir John asserts, bids his friend “Good Dy”, instead of “Good Day,” asks you “haow you are,” and on occasions deigns to speak of a “keow.”...

(BIN.YVP 93.23.12)

Excerpt 2

Sir – I am rejoiced to see one so well qualified to do it as Sir John Madden endeavouring to grapple with the vicious lah di-dah pronunciation and slovenly method of speaking which characterises young Victoria, and promises ere long to establish amongst us a tongue not understood of the English people. Everyone upon whose ear this depraved style painfully grates will also feel thankful to you for your leading article, which so well backs up what his Honour has said.

The early generations of colonial youth were noted for the purity of their pronunciation, as well as for freedom from provincialism, Mais nous avons changée [sic] tout cela. In the railway carriage we hear of the fineness of the “dy”, or of a “jahly syle in the bye” in the playground it is Beelee and Har-ee and Bahb (Bob). In church we are told to “pry”, and also to “prize Gahd”. Words of two syllables are pronounced as one, as “dlee” for “dearly”; three syllables as two... and these from the lips of those who boast of a university education.

Efforts indeed are needed to arrest the general deterioration. I know of a school in which the evil is being dealt with, and fairly effectually: for a new boy who rejoiced in a patronymic known in the principality,, proving to have the colonial twang in full perfection very difficult to extirpate, had a constant reminder by being derisively addressed by his schoolfellows as “Jownes.” - I am, &c.,

ONE WHO DOES NOT CALL A SPADE A SPYDE.

(ARG.YVP 93.28.1)

Excerpt 3

Sir, - I have been waiting expectantly for some abler pen than mine to take up the cudgel on behalf of native pronunciation, but a letter in your issue of to-day, signed “One Who Does Not Call a Spade a Spyde,” is the last straw, and I must

protest against the libel on Victorian natives going forth unchallenged. We do not use the language attributed to us, and I am sure our pronunciation will compare favourably with any other English colony on the globe.

We also do not call a spade a “spyde,” and if your correspondent heard someone in a railway carriage re-mark the fineness of the “dy,” or of having a “jahly syle in the by,” it must have emanated from the lips of an East-End Londoner. Even our larrikin is not guilty of such mispronunciation, although it has more than once been attributed to him; and a prominent comic singer recently from London, impersonating the larrikin, spoke of “Bellarine what’s down the by.” That is the London costermonger style, but there is no perceptible zing of colonialism in it.

My native brothers and sisters certainly do not speak of going to church to “pry,” nor do they say “prize” for praise. And if your correspondent has heard an [sic] University man say “nolge” for acknowledge and “cornly” for accordingly, then I hope one of our graduates will come forward on behalf of the University and prove that it must have been a very exceptional case.

We natives have numerous faults, certainly, which have been pointed out from time to time by visitors, such as Max O’Rell and others; but when “One Who Does Not Call a Spade a Spyde” rushes into print with a crude knowledge of his subject and accuses of a foreign language we have not acquired, it is time for some of us to come forward and deny it – I am. &c.

NATIVE.

(ARG.YVP 94.01.2)

Excerpt 4

Sir, -- As one who has had many dealings with young Victorians for years past, I must cordially agree with the letter of ‘Native’ in your yesterday’s issue. It is

essentially a gross libel on our young colonials to say that they call a “spade” a “spyde,” a “sail” a “syle,” and so forth. Your correspondents who affirm this must surely mistake the erroneous and vulgar pronunciation of cockney Londoners for that of our own young people.

As a graduate of the Melbourne University, and one who has received a liberal education, I think I am as well qualified to give an opinion on this point as another. I have never yet heard a Victorian University graduate, or for that matter an undergraduate either, shorten when speaking acknowledge into ‘nolge, or accordingly into ‘cornly’, or any into any other stupid abbreviation. My knowledge of University students is not a small one, and I know perfectly well how our young colonials talk.

And I must say candidly that I have been frequently struck by both the purity and the beauty of young Victoria’s pronunciation, while as to the elder “natives,” those who now don the wig and gown in the Law Courts, or make laws for us the Legislative Assembly, or who follow the healing art, and still have time to practise the graces of oratory, some of the possess a most exquisitely [sic] beautiful flow of English speech, language such as the world loves to dwell on with lingering ear, and to applaud, and to still cry More, more!

... Far be it from me to say that the speech of our younger colonials is perfect. But their errors are the errors of their English parents and are not self-grown. They drop the initial “h;” they say we are going ‘ome, we ‘ope for better times’ or they leave out the final “g;”, and talk of the “pudden” which their good mothers gave them for dinner on Christmas day. But these errors are not root errors; they may certainly be inherited, but they are not beyond the power of the teacher in his school to point out and to rebuke, and indeed he is there for the purpose!

No doubt it is to keep “the well of pure English defiled,” and those who love, as I love, the pure, stately and elevated language in which “Milton wrote and taught,” and which will one day become, I think, the universal language of the civilised globe, will agree that Sir John Madden has rendered a public service by drawing attention to the need in both our public and private schools of careful tuition in the correct method of pronouncing our words.

But it is quite another thing to grossly libel our young Victorians for errors of speech which are not theirs, but are a stage parody of London mispronunciation. And it is equally culpable to ignore the singular beauty of both language and pronunciation which many of our young colonials undoubtedly possess. Every shield has two sides. – I am, &c.

ERNEST JOSKE.

Albert-park, Jan. 1.

[Where does Mr. Joske get the two remarkable quotations he places between inverted commas? We fear his knowledge of the English poets is not so perfect as the “singular beauty” of his pronunciation. – ED. A.]

(ARG.YVP 94.02.5)

Excerpt 5

Sir, -- Adumbrated in the altruism of that diviner either where nothing is Archaic (which is not a quotation, though it sounds like one), doubtless Mr. Ernest Joske has not mixed much with the common or garden specimen of young Australian, but I have in my eye a young gentleman, whose relatives fancy themselves the very salt of this earth, who invariably says keow for cow, neow for now, geow for go, and feowl for fowl.

Also on the back blocks and in Central Australia, where Mr. Joske has probably never been, the pronunciation of English is most vilely slipshod, even amongst the sons of squatters who have been at good schools; and as for state-school educated bullock-drivers, or natives of the country, a nasal drawl with a kind of bastard cockney intonation is their characteristic. It all comes of laziness and want of proper teaching when young.

I once wrote a story giving in a bullocky conversation as exact as I could spell it, and it was returned by the editor of the paper I sent it to with the remark that “there was a want of reality in it.” The editor, like Mr. Joske, always mixed with superior kind [sic] of people, don’t you know. – I am, &c.

SPERO MELIORA.

(ARG.YVP 94.04.6)

Excerpt 6

I would like to advise Mr. Joske and ‘Native’ to take no more trouble in denouncing “gross libels” on our young fellow-countrymen – let them instead provide themselves with any good standard dictionary, and having thoroughly mastered the pronunciation of the words cow, town, day, play, &c., let them close their ears to all singular beauties of language and accent, which exist in imagination only, and open them to the slaughter of the English tongue which surrounds them; they will then agree with other sufferers that it is indeed time “spydes” were called spades in Victoria.

(ARG.YVP 94.07.1)