

## DOCUMENTS OF THE GENERAL FACULTY

**REPORT OF THE MEMORIAL RESOLUTION COMMITTEE FOR  
JAMES HINTON SLEDD**

The special committee of the General Faculty to prepare a memorial resolution for James H. Sledd, professor emeritus, English, has filed with the secretary of the General Faculty the following report.

Sue Alexander Greninger, Secretary  
The General Faculty

**IN MEMORIAM  
JAMES HINTON SLEDD**

James Hinton Sledd was born in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1914. He spent two substantial and significant periods of his career in the Department of English at The University of Texas at Austin, each period preceded by achievements of remarkable academic distinction. He came to Austin as a graduate student in 1939, having received a B.A. from Oxford University as a Rhodes Scholar (1939) and a B.A. from Emory University (1936, Phi Beta Kappa). After completing his dissertation on “The Alvearie of John Baret” under the supervision of DeWitt T. Starnes, he received a Ph.D. from UT in 1947.

He returned to Austin twenty-two years later as professor of English, after having held an assistant professorship at Duke University (1946-48) and tenured appointments at the University of Chicago (1948-1956), the University of California at Berkeley (1956-59), and Northwestern University (1959-1964). In 1959-1960, he also taught in Sri Lanka. He declined promotion to professor twice: first at Chicago and then at Berkeley when he accepted an offer of professor at Northwestern.

At UT Austin, James Sledd was a stimulating presence both in the classroom and out—a presence very directly until his retirement in 1984 and indirectly until his death on July 26, 2003. Among his enduring legacies is his shaping contribution to the program in English Language and Linguistics, a program that continues to attract graduate students from excellent undergraduate programs across the country. He also cared deeply about the teaching of composition and was stirred to passionate debates on its practice and ethics.

Readers of Sledd’s published writings—in scholarly matters, politics, and the overlap of the two—often recall his wittily stated dissenting views: a collection of his essays edited by a former student, Richard D. Freed, is aptly entitled *Eloquent Dissent*. Yet it is important to understand the positive as well as the negative strands running through his books, articles, reviews, and letters to the editor, not to mention his departmental memos.

Sledd often referred to the tripod of *literature*, *linguistics*, and *composition*. To name the topics in that order reflects the ascending levels of controversy that his writings stirred. He could give a contrarian reading of Chaucer’s “Clerk’s Tale” in an essay that became a reprinted classic. He could give a critique of linguistic theory that evoked instant rebuttal but proved true over time. However, the vexed topics of composition and its teaching have remained recalcitrantly controversial. As he put it, “To turn from the linguistic leg of our tripod to composition is to turn from general confusion to utter chaos, from neurosis to dementia.” A large part of the problem is with economic forces beyond the control of individual professors and departments, though Sledd was never hesitant to decry what he saw as professorial self-interest.

His writings on language and linguistics always brought clarity to the subject. A famous review in 1964 of a new history of the English language began with an ominous acknowledgment:

A publisher’s reader who recommends that a typescript should not be published and who is later invited to review the printed book is on a spot, particularly when the authors are established scholars. The safe thing is a change of mind; but if not even prayerful reconsideration will accomplish that, the only other course is to accept the burden of

proof and take the approach direct: statement of the problem itself, general description of the book under review, detailed examination, unchanged conclusion.

After four pages of detailed references to bad proofreading, sloppy mechanics, awkward writing, and inaccurate quotation, Sledd found the rest of the problems too diverse for generalization. Sixteen pages follow, the remaining ninety-two problems neatly numbered. An especially characteristic quality of the review is his recurring criticism of an attempt to apply new theory to old topics. Pitfalls could easily have trapped the criticizer. In this instance, the new theory was Noam Chomsky's generative grammar and the old topics were the facts of the history of the English language. Often a project of this kind is attacked from the view of a slightly newer theory, which in turn is soon superseded, or from an older stance that falsely denies the possibility of progress. A close rereading of Sledd's review forty years after its publication shows that nearly every comment is enduringly timely, with neither the short brash life of a counter-theory nor the stick-in-the-mud quality of a presumably non-theoretical view. His review essay remains a cautionary guide to writing this kind of book long after the book that prompted it has been forgotten. It is also indicative of the careful attention that he gave dissertations—to the initial chagrin but ultimate benefit of the doctoral candidate.

If James Sledd could be withering in his assessment of other scholarship, he did not shrink from aiming his ferocious articulateness and wit at himself. A single complex sentence captures the nexus of one of the few moments in the humanities that can truly be called “revolutionary”; Sledd's own loss of invested time; his ability to recognize the devastating value of the superseding theory; and his amusement at the attention of the popular press. The “Introduction” to *English Linguistics: An Introductory Reader* (1970) is officially by the three coeditors, though the writing is unmistakably Sledd's:

The spectacular losses of gambling popularizers of American structuralism are now gruesomely familiar: in 1959 James Sledd published an English grammar (drafted between '52 and '54) which was accurately described as out of date at the meeting where its publication was announced; and the thrusts and counterthrusts by more distinguished combatants like Hockett and Chomsky have been immortalized by *Time* magazine itself.

Acknowledging the overthrown theoretical setting within which he had written *A Short Introduction to English Grammar*, Sledd returned to the classroom as an auditor to inform himself about the new setting—both at MIT and at UT Austin. Emmon Bach and a very young Stanley Peters taught a course that Sledd audited along with graduate students. In his response to the changed world of theory, he was not at all typical of structural linguists of the time.

Nor was he typical of sociolinguists in his response to the real-world urgencies of the 1960s. His two best known and most widely debated essays are “Bi-Dialectism: The Linguistics of White Supremacy” (1969) and “Doublespeak: Dialectology in the Service of Big Brother” (1972). Sledd questioned both the possibility and the ethical motivations for requiring African American students to shift between two dialects as the occasion demanded. These essays were constantly misread as proposing something they did not do: deny African American students the opportunity to learn Standard English. Scrupulously careful as always in his writing, Sledd repeatedly attached an adjective to the noun “bidialectism”: “compulsory,” “mandatory,” “imposed,” “coercive,” “enforced,” “obligatory,” “regimented.” His most poignant and moving plea was that veiled capitalistic motivations should not remain unexamined. It was the responsibility of teachers, he argued, to try to change society rather than coerce students into conformity with its norms as a means toward a promised upward mobility. Some dismissed Sledd as quixotic.

Others may have been distracted from his adjectival qualifiers by his impugning the motives of those he saw as upwardly mobile academics. Whatever the justice of Sledd's attribution of motives, in these attacks his prose style and metaphors attain Swiftian brilliance:

Government and the foundations began to spray money over the academic landscape like liquid fertilizer, and the professional societies began to bray and paw at the rich new grass.

The linguists think that people who do knowingly what Miss Fidditch did in her innocence, will do it more efficiently, as if eating the apple made a skilled worker out of Eve.

These innocent usages, which are as familiar as the sun in the late Confederacy, are apparently the terror of Northern employers. . . .

There are a few scholarly writers—C. S. Lewis comes to mind, Sledd's examiner at Oxford—who can produce with apparent effortlessness a simile or metaphor that is so right the reader sits up and laughs out loud.

It is instructive for slower teachers to know that a man of swift riposte in oral debate and friendly conversation prepared his class notes with meticulous thoroughness, typed on his old clackety machine: Call the roll, explain missing rosters, and so on. The day's plan was always outlined in complete detail. Then the class itself seemed to float lightly on Sledd's immense learning and mental associations. Those of us who are pressed for time on a given class day, hoping to make it through the hour on native wit, might well feel humbled and slovenly.

Jim Sledd and his wife, Joan, whom he met at Oxford, were gracious hosts for generations of students and faculty at their home on Gilbert Street in Tarrytown. The food and drink were sumptuous, and the evenings often wound their way to rousing renditions of Methodist hymns—echoes doubtless of his father, a prominent minister and early civil rights leader in Atlanta. Upon his retirement, Jim and Joan moved to Lake Travis, where he tended his bees and orchard and continued to write on subjects that concerned him deeply. Jim loved to fish and camp and to spend his summers at his cabin in Montana. At his memorial service—by his request a party—the moving and eloquent remembrances of his children and grandchildren gave his colleagues a view of a beloved and loving man of immense generosity, tenderness, playfulness, and care.

This memorial resolution was prepared by a special committee consisting of Professors Thomas Cable (chair), Mary Blockley, Linda Ferreira-Buckley, and James D. Garrison.

Distributed to the dean of the College of Liberal Arts, the executive vice president and provost, and the president on December 22, 2004. Copies are available on request from the Office of the General Faculty, FAC 22, F9500. This resolution is posted under "Memorials" at: <http://www.utexas.edu/faculty/council/>.