

## Harold E. Palmer's Expectations (1922)

by Richard C. Smith

The name 'Harold E. Palmer'—which has great resonance for many Japanese teachers of English—is known by very few native speaker English teachers currently in Japan. This sad fact, symptomatic of a general lack of historical awareness in western ELT (English Language Teaching) circles, is particularly regrettable since Palmer's most productive years (1922-36) were spent in this country. His work here was ultimately to have lasting, though generally unacknowledged post-war effects on ELT not only in Japan but also worldwide.

In the photograph, Palmer is sitting on the deck of the Shizuoka Maru, at some point during his initial sea voyage to Japan. He has given up his lectureship at University College London (UCL) to serve as 'Linguistic Adviser' to the *Monbusho* for a period of three years, with a remit to develop suggestions for the reform of English teaching in Japanese secondary schools. In retrospect, some of Palmer's initial expectations seem to have been unrealistically high. What, then, is he thinking as the Shizuoka Maru nears Japan?

Certainly, he is looking forward to a 'cultural adventure' in an exotic setting which has fascinated him since childhood. At the same time, he believes that he has much to contribute. He feels flattered to have been head-hunted for his modern views on language teaching, and expects a ready audience for his ideas among Japanese teachers of English.

However, if Palmer had left Japan after

three years, his impact would probably have been negligible. He first had to get used to Japan and the Japanese education system, learn the language, listen to and build alliances with and among teachers, see his way through culture shock (one result of 'orientalist' preconceptions) and cope with the dawning realization that his 'scientific' conception of language teaching was *not* as universally welcome as he



Harold E. Palmer

had expected. Palmer's intrinsic interest in Japan, coupled with his idealism and a certain pride in fulfilling his mission, was probably what kept him here. At the same time, the 'real' work of adapting his ideas to Japan was only to start in earnest when he began to temper his initial high hopes and start to work 'within the system'. Instead of leaving as planned, then, he stayed on

for another eleven years, devoting considerably more attention than initially to the development of methods and materials specifically for the Japanese secondary school context.

These days many ALTs come to Japan with similar expectations to those of Palmer (though with less expertise), but have to leave the JET Program (me) after three years, just when they may be starting to become effective. Like Palmer, some will wish to stay on, to complete their own 'mission'. I wonder—could a place not be found for such committed, relatively acculturated ALTs, as a place was once found for Harold E. Palmer?

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## The Secret of Medley's Success

by Richard C. Smith

Austin W. Medley (1875-1940) taught English from 1906 to 1938 at the Tokyo 'Foreign Language School' (FLS), which—as Tokyo University of Foreign Studies (TUFS)—is currently celebrating its hundredth year of independent existence. Thirty-five years after his death, Medley was still remembered with affection and respect by former students: in 1975 a group of them (including Ogawa Yoshio and Iwasaki Tamihei, two of the best-known figures in post-war ELT and English Studies, respectively) compiled a book of reminiscences and arranged for a memorial tablet to be placed on his grave in Chiswick, London. These gestures show how popular and influential Medley had been as a teacher. Indeed, he was—according to a younger colleague at FLS, A. S. Hornby—'undoubtedly the best-known foreign teacher of English in Japan' when he retired in 1938. Other teachers, both Japanese and foreign, had frequently visited his classes, 'anxious to learn from him and study the methods by which he was achieving such remarkable results'.

However, unlike Harold Palmer (see my last essay, and next month's), Medley was no 'methodologist'. Without formal training, his 'special gift' for teaching (Ogawa Yoshio) had emerged out of hard experience, as a 1931 letter in the personal files of Susie Medley testifies: 'When I started teaching, the first 6 months were hell and I thought I

should never get used to it'. Hornby notes how Medley developed his approach principally by 'seeking to gain an understanding of the mental processes of his pupils', while several of his former students, in their own tributes, recall especially the concentrated, individualized attention they had received both inside and outside class.

Hornby continues: '[Medley] had that virtue which is placed above most other virtues in Japan, the virtue of sincerity. His pupils knew that he wanted them to learn, that he was worried if they did not learn. They always had his sympathy in their difficulties—a sympathy that very often took a practical form when illness, poverty or other causes made difficult the continuation of their studies'.



Austin W. Medley

Medley's 'approach', then, was idiosyncratic and humanistic, deriving from a sincere desire to help his students and an ability—developed on the basis of long experience in Japan—correctly to identify their psychological as well as linguistic needs. After thirty-one years he left Japan with the following words: 'If you ask me why I have stayed here so long, the answer is a very simple one—that I have found great happiness here; that I liked the country and the people, and I hope and believe they liked me, and found in me a friend whom they could trust. What is the secret of this? Nothing but human kindness'.

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## Why Go Back to Palmer?

by Richard C. Smith

Over the last fifty years a powerful ELT industry has grown up in the UK and the USA, and methods, materials, resource books, university-based expertise and teacher associations have proliferated. Japanese academics, officials and teacher educators, like those in many countries, have tended to look to the latest theories in the west for inspiration, ushering in, for example, ideas from Oral Approach (in the late 1950s and 1960s), and more recently Communicative Language Teaching. Since 1987, the JET Program(me) has brought increasing numbers of foreign teachers to Japan, and looks set to continue to do so, if only to make possible the latest 'major reform' in Japan: the introduction of English teaching into elementary education early in the coming century.

It is important to look back as well as forward if we are to disentangle the reality (*honno*) from the rhetoric (*tatemae*) of ELT 'reform' in Japan. A good, and honest place to start, for example, might be with the realization that — fundamentally — very little has changed in the way English is typically taught in the school system since Harold E. Palmer arrived here on his own reforming mission in 1922. But if so little has changed, why remember Palmer at all?

One answer might be that if *even* Palmer, whose at least partially Japan-inspired ideas underlay so much post-war ELT thinking in the west, nevertheless failed to have a large-

scale impact on English education in Japan itself, there may be little hope in the present and the future for less localized, more 'advanced' approaches (unadapted ideas from Communicative Language Teaching, for example). Rather than looking automatically to the west for inspiration, it might be worth re-evaluating traditional teaching practices. Why have imported methods and personnel so consistently failed to replace these with 'something better'?



Harold E. Palmer

Secondly, Palmer's work in Japan is worth recalling for more positive reasons. During his fourteen years here he did succeed in founding and nurturing an active research institute / teachers' association in Tokyo, at a time when almost no serious thought was given to English as a foreign language teaching anywhere else in the world. Palmer's Institute survived the war as 'IRLT' (*goken*), and has continued to inspire Japanese teachers interested in 'reform from within'. Building on Palmer's ideas, IRLT members have managed to resist and at the same time offer practical alternatives to the importation of the latest western fashions.

If teachers could be further encouraged to develop the best in their own context, current practices and history, might Japan not find itself once again 'at the centre' of appropriate reform in the coming century?

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## What Hornby Took Home

by Richard C. Smith

As I implied in last month's essay, the traffic of ELT ideas has not always been one-way, from west to east, and the career of A. S. Hornby (1878 - 1978) indicates clearly that ideas developed by teachers in Japan can be of value elsewhere in the world. Indeed, some of the central planks of 'ELT' as we now know it were established in post-war Britain by Hornby, on the basis of ideas he had been exposed to and had himself helped to develop between 1924 and 1941 as a member of Palmer's research institute, IRET, in Japan.

Having worked for ten years as a teacher in Kyushu (at what is now Oita University), Hornby moved to Tokyo and became editor of IRET's *Bulletin* after Palmer's departure in 1936. Aside from this work and university teaching, Hornby concentrated on compiling the *Advanced Learner's Dictionary* for which he is now, perhaps, best-known. This was published (with a different title) by IRET/Kaitakusha in 1942, but Hornby had by then been interned, and, although he was allowed to return to England later in the year, he did not himself see a bound copy until after the war. Photographically reproduced by Oxford University Press in 1948, this dictionary was subsequently re-exported all over the world. Two years previously, as 'Linguistic Adviser' to the British Council, Hornby had successfully founded the influential journal *English Language Teaching* (now *ELT Journal*), clearly modelling this on IRET's own *Bulletin*. Hornby edited *ELT* for several years, and his many articles

on teaching methodology in the new journal defined a 'Situational Approach' to language teaching which was to form the bedrock of British ELT up to (and, it could be said, even beyond) the relatively recent 'communicative revolution'. In a nutshell, situational language teaching involved the oral presentation of new patterns and lexical items to students, with the aid of pictures, objects, actions and/or paraphrase, in advance of work with a text and speaking/writing practice on its basis. In its essentials, this approach was largely derived from the 'reformed methods' which had been developed within IRET prior to the war.



A. S. Hornby

The influence from Japan — a recently defeated nation — on 'British ELT' was inadequately acknowledged in the immediate aftermath to World War II, and remains under-appreciated in the west to this day. It cannot be said that Hornby actively disguised the influence of Palmer and IRET on his post-war work; indeed, he continued to refer to Palmer's inspirational role until the end of his career. Nevertheless, the roots of the new 'British' ELT enterprise in pre-war IRET work in Japan were, by and large, conveniently forgotten by the British Council and U. K. publishers. Foreign teachers working in Japan and other countries outside the established 'centres' of English language teaching will, perhaps, take heart from this hidden history: indeed, we might (still) have as much to offer the 'centre' as it (still) has to offer us!

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## The ELEC Specialists' Conference (1956)

by Richard C. Smith

A. S. Hornby made a brief return visit to Tokyo in 1956 to attend a 'Specialists' Conference' sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation under the auspices of an 'English Language Exploratory Committee' (ELEC). Soon afterwards, Hornby wrote (in a letter to Palmer's daughter): 'American influences are strong now... Fries, of the University of Michigan, is the new star'. Speaking alongside Hornby had been two newcomers to Japan—Charles C. Fries (1887-1967), head of the Michigan English Language Institute and Freeman Twaddell, a professor at Brown University. Rockefeller had placed faith particularly in Fries to bring about nothing less than 'the transformation of English language teaching methods throughout Japan'.

Hornby's sense that IRET/IRLT work was soon to be overtaken by new 'scientific' ideas emanating from America was confirmed by Rockefeller's representative in Japan, who confided to his employer: 'Fries and Twaddell so impressed the Japanese that Palmer and Hornby were overshadowed completely'. The final recommendations of the Conference were marked, in particular, by the ideas of Fries, originator of the Oral Approach (the 'Michigan Method') and prophet of the new academic discipline of applied linguistics. Thus, teachers were encouraged to study up-to-date linguistics and engage in 'oral practice with materials prepared according to scientific principles'

(those of contrastive analysis).

Over the ensuing years, Fries and Twaddell made further visits to Japan, attempting — together with ELEC — to spread the Oral Approach via new materials, lectures and teacher training seminars. The underlying, unquestioned assumption was that what had worked in Michigan should be equally applicable in Japanese secondary schools: the superior new methods and materials would be enough on their own to overcome any obstacles.

The Oral Approach gained adherents among Japanese teachers in the 1960s, but the efforts of ELEC to bring about wholesale change were ultimately no more successful than those of IRET before the war. Like IRET,

however, ELEC has survived, and its now largely autonomous teachers' association remains a force for innovation in the Japanese context. Lynn Earl Henrichsen, in his history of ELEC's early years, has identified a lack of official (Ministry of Education) support as one of the most significant factors limiting ELEC's overall success. However, another of his conclusions may be even more apposite: 'Non-Japanese who wish to see reforms take place in Japanese ELT would do well to join and support... indigenous movements', rather, that is, than trust in the inevitable superiority of an imported approach, however rational and 'scientific' it might appear.

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Charles C. Fries

## Looking back, and forward

by Richard C. Smith

In this series of essays I've paid most attention to Harold E. Palmer, since among foreign teachers he probably has the greatest claim to having 'made a difference' to English education in Japan. However, I've implied that Palmer's ideas, as mediated in part by A. S. Hornby, were ultimately more influential outside Japan than inside. On a more modest scale, A. W. Medley showed how adaptation to one's surroundings can enable foreign teachers to be successful with their students and colleagues. Palmer, too, learned to modify his initial approach, but in the second half of the twentieth century a relatively top-down conception of 'applied linguistics' took hold, and progressive teachers in Japan were strongly influenced by developments in western contexts. Thus, Charles C. Fries's 'Oral Approach' has given way to 'Communicative Language Teaching' (CLT), both of these having been developed originally for other, quite different settings.

Visits by foreign 'experts' unfamiliar with Japan played a role in the propagation of both approaches but in the case of CLT an additional factor has been the influx of Assistant English Teachers (AETs), who now have their own history of more than 20 years (they existed before the JET Program (me) started—indeed, I still have fond memories of my first job as an AET in Gunma, 1984-86). The great increase in numbers of AETs since 1987 has been justified officially in terms of their expected contribution to the promotion of CLT and 'internationalization'. Indeed in the latter area AETs seem to have repaid the investment (both in local and school communities, and, in many cases, on

returning to their home countries as friends of Japan). CLT, though has not prevailed over more entrenched teaching practices, nor—if we consider the history of previous foreign 'imports'—does this seem likely to occur. Unfortunately, not only AETs but also quite a few Japanese academics, officials and teachers have tended simply to assume that this western approach *must* be valid in Japanese secondary schools, ignoring contextual factors such as possible educational (non-utilitarian) goals of English study, lack of exposure to English outside the classroom, large class size, typical patterns of classroom interaction, generally monolingual composition of the student body, underlying strengths and weaknesses of Japanese teachers, lack of time for teacher development or extra materials preparation, and 'washback' from examinations.

In such circumstances, and in summary of these six essays, my conclusion has to be that it is Japanese secondary school teachers themselves, not relative 'outsider' (including academics, officials, foreign teachers, visiting experts and AETs) who hold the key to appropriate improvement in English education. Japanese teachers need to be, and can be better encouraged to effect 'change from within'.

I would, then, like to dedicate this last essay to all the secondary school teachers and student-teachers I gained so much from getting to know in Japan—the future is in *your* hands!

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