

Jack White—A Life in Words

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“A chield’s amang you takin’ notes,
and faith he’ll prent it.”

-- Robert Burns

‘Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;
All mimsy were the borogoves
And the mome raths outgrabe
-- Lewis Carroll, Jabberwocky, *Through The Looking Glass*

“It seems very pretty,” she said when she had finished it,
“but it’s *rather* hard to understand!” ... “Somehow it seems to fill my head with ideas —
only I don’t exactly know what they are!”

-- Alice, upon reading Jabberwocky in *Through The Looking Glass*

“What though his head be empty, provided
his commonplace book be full.”

-- Jonathan Swift, *A Tale of a Tub*

“Ill fares the land, to galloping fears a prey,
where gobbledygook accumulates, and words decay.”
-- James Thurber, *The Psychosemanticist Will See You Now*, Mr. Thurber

Ladies and Gentleman of The Scottish Club:

Last year, The Scottish Club honoured Jack White, my father, with a lunch at the Jack Russell. Today, I would like to formally thank you for your tribute and your many kind words. My family was deeply touched.

We would especially like to thank the fine speakers that day: Enoch Kent, Terrence Bredin, Sean and Kathleen Mulchahy, Martin Smith, and Gerald Steele (tin whistle and all).

On behalf of my mother Daisy, who is here today, and my family, our heartfelt thanks. In Irish as I believe in Scottish,

Go raibh ma agat
Go n-éirí an bóthar leat

My talk today is entitled “Jack White: A Life in Words.” As many of you I am sure know, my father was an inveterate collector of words. That collection has now fallen to me, gleaned from the many clippings, in the many files, thankfully, in the *one* basement. I will try today to give you a little taste of that collection.

And because I don’t play the tin whistle nearly as well as Gerald, I will also offer up a “Commonplace Book Top Ten,” which in honour of Saint Patrick’s Day numbers more like 15.

My father loved words, pure and simple. Long ones, short ones, fat ones, skinny ones, they were all fit to be tied and untied by him. He breathed words like others breath air. Few went unobserved. Like a mechanic, spreading engine parts in every corner of the yard, he filled his world with words, endlessly tinkering. What came out always came out the better.

If he had a preference, it was akin to Churchill’s, “Short words are best and old words when short are best of all.” Or with Orwell’s cure for those afflicted with the *un*-word disease, which suggested they memorize this sentence: “A not unblack dog chased a not unsmall rabbit across a not ungreen field.”

James Thurber was his guide, paving the way for psychosemanticists alike to follow. He railed against the “polysyllabic monstrositis” plaguing the wordy. He oft reminded us of Thurber’s warning: “The onset of utter

meaninglessness is imminent.” *Izes and wises, in terms of words, jargoned up* his literary landscape. He had no stomach for it.

As Thurber writes in *The Psychosemanticist Will See You Now, Mr. Thurber*:

The conspiracy of yammer and merchandising against literate speech reached a notorious height in 1956 with a singing commercial for a certain cigarette which we were told “tastes good like a cigarette should.” I have one or two suggestions for the Madison Avenue illiterates in the gray flannel suits. The first is a slogan for a brewery: “We still brew good like we used to could.” The second is an ad for some maker of tranquillizing drugs:

Does he seldomly praise you any more? Those kind of husbands can be cured of the grumps with Hush-Up. So give you and he a break. Put Hush-Up in his food. It don’t have no taste.

They would have gotten along like a house on fire, Mr. Thurber and my father, crackling and cackling together with delight.

He also liked to record the utterings of others, such as Sir Boyle Roche, the Irish parliamentarian and great proponent of the Irish bull and Sir John Pentland Mahaffy, Trinity college provost, two of his oft cited sources. “Along the untrodden paths of the future, I can see the footprints of an unknown hand.” said Roche. “In Ireland the inevitable never happens and the unexpected constantly occurs,” said Mahaffy.

Toronto’s own Allan Lamport, Yogi Berra, and a litany of politicians stoked his pipe. According to Lampy, “Toronto is the city of the future and always will be.” According to Yogi, who could fill a book of his own, “I really didn’t say everything I said.” Mind you, when asked if he wanted his pizza cut into 4 or 8 pieces, he did say “Better make it four. I don’t think I can eat eight.” No newspaper, book, or public uttering was safe from my father’s pen and paper.

I don’t know when he first began storing his many scribbles in his commonplace book along with the various cuttings and bits and pieces of this and that, but when he died, his notebooks filled a dresser and two filing cabinets. Thank goodness, he also typed and thus there remains a legible, somewhat ordered record of his musings. Almost to a fault, the subject is words. The mostly indecipherable books, I believe, he intended solely for himself; not for posterior viewing. When enough language lapses had got his

goat he would set his hand to writing, using his commonplace books as reference.

No source was spared. From a literacy teacher in Saskatoon:

“People who are illiterate now weren’t 20 years ago.”

He did prefer politicians, however. From Robert Thompson, the Social Credit leader in the 1960s:

“You’ve buttered your bread and now you have to lie on it.

“If this thing starts to snowball, it will catch fire across the country.”

Sometimes, he just ticked next to someone else’s scribblings, recorded more formally in newspapers, from which is now revealed more of the man. Would that we all were judged by what got us up in the middle of the night to jot down nocturnal interruptions or out of a comfy repose on a favoured chair to mark a line for further thought. What strikes a chord from other’s tunes must surely tell us of ourselves. To be sure, we *choose* what to remember and what to recollect.

In a six-part series by Edwin Newman in the Sixties (entitled *It’s clear our language is in danger*), he began in earnest, his ticks a perfect precis for anyone caring to look back.

Said Andy Messersmith of Mike Marshall, both pitchers for the L.A. Dodgers: “I am a better student of hitters since Mike joined us. My *studiology* is better.”

Said Howard Cosell, the famous *Mouth that Roared*, referring to his guests on either side of him in the Monday Night Football booth: “I am *variously bounded and circumscribed* by Senator Edward Kennedy and John Denver.”

When House Speaker Carl Albert announced that he would retire at the end of 1976, according to the United Press, Thomas “Tip” O’Neill of Massachusetts was touted as the “apparent heir apparent.”

“My opponent,” said campaigning Oklahoma governor David Boren, “already is setting the tone of his campaign to win the runoff. It is the tone of typical old politics — negative mudslinging.”

He noted also with his ticks that companies do not grow, they *enjoy positive growth*, affirmative action can be both *positive* affirmative action and *negative* affirmative action, and that baseballs, according to Mike Schmidt, can be *hit good*, but don't necessarily *carry good*.

The last thing he clipped and marked was (on St. Andrew's and the Dunhill Cup):

“But as the stampede to see the incredible drummed a growing thunder on to the sand base of these hallowed links, she shook herself from slumber and put the teeth back in.”

It's quite unbelievable how much stuff he was compelled to observe and record. I can't possibly record nor even review it all.

Hansard was indeed the place for him to work, with its daily hit of language uses and abuses. The Hansard years are the hardest for me to compile, because they are quite voluminous and for the most part quite illegible. As well, his sources are sometimes revealed and sometimes not. Out of context, many are hard to fairly represent. As my father surely discovered, as he began in earnest to compile a book for publication, it is not enough to mangle the language, there must also be an anecdotal or contextual sense. To be sure, the mangling is funny, but as in any multi-word pile-up, after a while the rubber-necking begins to hurt.

Had the politicians stopped talking long enough, he might have finished his planned book on their utterances. Alas, with each new session, there was another crop, equally as good (or bad) as the last. I think, had the computer been there at the beginning of his career, we would now have an exhaustive account of thirty years of language carnage. Yes, we *all* muff it up now and again. I guess, if you make it to print or television or, better yet, to parliament, you had better watch not only *what* you say, but *how* you say it. You never know where a psychosemanticist is lurking. Happily, in so doing, however, he has helped us to speak and write more clearly and effectively. And has given us a slew of stories to remember.

I hope I can do his collection justice by bringing the main bits back to life. Quite simply, I believe that what my father has recorded in his life as a journalist, editor, after-dinner speaker, and all-round wordsmith should not be buried nor forgotten. There is just too much life oozing from his take on a life in words.

I want to omit as little as possible.

Once, he tried to formalize his observatory status and began the Trivia Research Foundation. His seriousness extended to his fun. The following press release says it best:

TORONTO---Trivia Research Foundation, an organization which promises to provide the answers to society's least pressing problems, was launched at an informal press conference at Toronto's Radio and Artists Club today.

The Foundation will specialize in obscure references, "although," said Jack White, TRF's proprietor, "no subject is too trivial that cannot command our full resources."

Mr. White, who describes himself as a gentleman, scholar and good judge of Irish whiskey in his promotional literature, said the Foundation would shortly be hiring a full staff of experts to complement the vast array of useless knowledge that has been painfully collected over the years and now stored in TRF's computer.

"It is one of life's great ironies," said Mr. White, who took the occasion to list 99 of the world's great ironies, "that the things that count least in life, should count the most."

It is in this that we expect to make our greatest contribution."

One of the first contributions was from "An Anecdotal Life of Sir John A. Macdonald":

A deputation went to Ottawa from St. Catherines some years ago to ask that a greater volume of water be let into the Welland Canal, for the benefit of the manufacturers. "All right," said Sir John, after hearing the deputation, "We'll give you all the water you want, but you must buy your own whiskey."

Ever the newspaper man, he signed off all pieces he sent to prospective newspaper or magazine editors with the customary "-30-", meaning cut 30 words and resubmit. Wise advice indeed for a life in words.

-30-

And now, drum roll please, The Commonplace Book Top 15 (I can't possibly keep it to 10)

1. In 1953, President Eisenhower had two inaugural balls instead of the usual one. CBS radio announcer, *Larry Le Sueur* had this to say: And now we take you to Washington where both presidential balls are in full swing.

2. Baseball pitcher *Tug McGraw* on his hefty new salary: Ninety percent I'll spend on good times, women, and Irish Whiskey. The other 10 per cent I'll probably waste.
3. *Prince Philip*: I am referred to in that splendid language [Urdu] as "Fella belong Mrs. Queen."
4. *E. B. White*: Be obscure clearly.
5. In North Thailand, a sign advertising a donkey ride for tourists quite unabashedly said: "Would You Like To Ride On Your Own Ass?"
6. A lawyer at a Canadian deportation hearing described his client, Xaviera Hollander, The Happy Hooker, as possessed of "interpersonal skills."
7. From a brochure for a Norwegian golf course: The course itself is a nine-holer, but its varied tees make it an exacting 6,500 yard 18-hole, par 72 challenge. Gentlemen playing the 3rd, 4th, 12th, and 13th holes are requested to wash their balls prior to teeing off as the water hazard alongside is the city's reservoir of drinking water.
8. From an artistic press release: She currently works with clay in a sculptural context.

And from Hansard (unattributed):

9. I have made it my business to go to the members' library frequently, but I have yet to see anyone in it, including myself.
10. I do not think there is sufficient evidence to prove adultery. I have had considerable experience in this line of work.
11. *Robert Nixon* (then Opposition Leader): Will the Premier assure himself of the essentiality of the programme?
Bill Davis (then Premier): The definition of essentiality is a judgement decision sometimes based on the degree of essentiality.

Recently, this item appeared in the *Globe and Mail* which I'm sure would have caught his attention.

12. If lawyers are disbarred and clergyman defrocked, doesn't it follow that electricians can be delighted, musicians denoted, tree surgeons debarked and dry cleaners depressed?

And for some St. Patrick's Day colour:

13. The Irish prefer drink to food because it interferes less with drink. *Oliver Gogarty*

14. If one could only teach the English how to talk and the Irish how to listen, society would be quite civilized. *Oscar Wilde*

And to end, appropriately, *with Sir Boyle Roche*:

15. Sir Boyle Roche was the author of some of the best bulls on record. It was Sir Boyle who made the startling discovery that a man differs from a bird in not being able to be in two places at once.

There are thousands of these in my father's collection. His net was big, and he got up awfully early. I thank you for letting me share them with you.

John K. White
St. Patrick's Day, 1998