

OBITUARY

Donald C. Laycock (1936-1988)

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On December 27, 1989 Donald C. Laycock, Senior Fellow in the Linguistics Department of the Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University, passed away after a brief illness. He left behind his wife and three children, as well as a wealth of published and unpublished materials on a variety of topics related to language.

Don completed his first fieldwork in PNG in the Sepik area, resulting in a comparative study of the Ndu language family and his thesis (1965a). He continued to publish on the Sepik languages (e.g. 1965b, 1968a, 1973, 1975a, 1975b, 1975c, 1976b, 1978a), demonstrating his prolific output over the years.¹

In his Sepik fieldwork Don came into contact with the extensive use of Tok Pisin (TP). As a result of this interest and his own proficiency he wrote a number of technical and popular articles (e.g. 1969a, 1970a, 1970b, 1970c, 1977a, 1977b, 1982a, 1985a, 1985b, 1985c).

Out of the natural interaction of TP and vernaculars Don also became interested in various aspects of language and society, long before sociolinguistics became a popular topic. This led him to consider such diverse themes as language and dialect (1962), bilingualism (1966), multilingualism (1979b), number systems (1975h), language "engineering" (1975i, 1977f), special languages (1977d), language change (1977e) and, especially, various unusual features of language.

In fact, it was Don's interest in the unusual that led him to examine such topics as folklore, pseudo-science, occultism, slang, tongue-speaking, magic, games and puzzles, and so on. A self-acclaimed skeptic, he spent much of his life on two research tracks: on the one hand he followed the more conservative and traditional research of anthropological and linguistic topics, but on the other hand, he explored the extraordinary and bizarre. The two tracks often crossed, in poems,

stories, newspaper and magazine articles. For examples of the traditional and the aberrant being mixed in his research and writings note, for example, 1967, 1968b, 1970d, 1972d, and 1987a. Don often seemed to be preoccupied with being uninhibited by certain lexicographical practices, such as not including questionable four-letter words in dictionaries, or with those who judged written materials as indiscreet or irreverent. One of his major works (1982d), entitled **The Best Bawdry**, was highly publicized and well-received by the media. Again it represents his scholarship on the one hand and his search for the unconventional on the other. This is evidenced in his studies of “angelic” languages (1979c) and tongue-speaking (1985a) as well.

The Buin language, spoken in the southernmost area of the North Solomons Province, was one of Don’s first loves, following his fieldwork there in 1966-67 and again in 1980. In addition to his published items on Buin (e.g. 1969b, 1969c, 1972a, 1972b, 1975f) he had been compiling an extensive dictionary on the language which is to include grammatical notes and texts as well.

Don was also interested in the wider connections of Papuan languages (1975e, 1975g, 1976a). He wrote on their history of research (1971a, 1975d), on features of West Irian languages (1972c, 1979a), and he championed the great quantity and diversity of Melanesian languages (1969d, 1977c, 1982c, 1982b), encouraging their study as well (1969e).

As an Associate Editor of *Pacific Linguistics* since its inception, Don contributed some thirty items to the series. His most recent fieldwork was on Pacific pidgins and, with Alice Buffett in 1988, **Speak Norfolk Today** has been published. A number of other articles on Pitcairn-Norfolk are in press.

Don’s works were always creative and explorative. He was not interested in just a logical analysis of the data, but was prepared to explore, interrogate, and delve into all kinds of peripheral issues. He was a frequent contributor to newspapers because he was interested in current social issues. He kept us all thinking and we in PNG shall miss him very much.

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NOTE

1. Because Don's published materials are extensive I have not attempted to list them in the references which follow. A memorial volume is planned for him and will contain his full bibliography. I am grateful to Tom Dutton for bibliographic and personal information on Don which included Dr. Michael Sawer's eulogy at the church of St. John the Baptist, Reid, ACT, on January 3, 1989.