

# Forgotten Figure on the Bridge: Richard Mulcaster

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Richard Mulcaster, educational reformer and linguistic theorist of the sixteenth century stands apart from his age for his original and surprisingly modern approach to language. He has been, by and large ignored by both his contemporaries and modern linguists. This paper evaluates his contribution to linguistic theory through a comparison with his contemporaries and reviews the body of literature available on him in an attempt to account for the relative obscurity to which he has been condemned.

Richard Mulcaster, first master of Merchant Taylors School and later Master at St Paul's in London was the author of two books. The first, *Positions* (1580) which dealt with educational themes was followed by *The First Part of the Elementarie* in 1582. This last was intended to have been the first in a series of works which would deal with the new curriculum he proposed. These reforms, radical in their day, are characterised by the emphasis placed on the teaching of the "petties", that is, the elementary schooling for those who would go on to grammar school, at a time when this step on the educational ladder was on the whole neglected.. The second factor which made his proposals unique was the fact that he placed the vernacular at the cornerstone of education, thereby displacing Latin and Greek, the traditional core of the syllabus to a supplementary role. It was imperative, he felt that English children know their own language as well as the classics. This is the theme that runs through *The Elementarie*, which is a defence of the vernacular, a rejection of the spelling reform movement's pursuit of an isomorphic language and the platform for Mulcaster's alternative. In presenting his objections to phonemic reform and conducting his defence of the vernacular, Mulcaster builds up a theory of the nature of language and examines how the mechanisms of custom and change influence its growth, development and its social function.

The theory of language that Mulcaster develops is unfortunately no more than a tantalizing outline. He himself was aware of this fact: "I have opened the waie unto som other" (246).<sup>1</sup> The language section of *The Elementarie* was conceived as preliminary groundwork which would establish the principles on which his curriculum was based. The subjects to be studied were five: reading, writing, drawing, singing and playing. There is a rich store of linguistic theory in *The Elementarie*. For the twentieth century reader, the issues he raises, his analysis of language, his pronouncements on reform and that of spelling in particular have an air of familiarity, to the extent that it is at times difficult to imagine one is reading a text from the last decades of the sixteenth century.

Mulcaster's first premise is that all languages are similar in their deep structures. The differentiation that occurs in the superficial structures is the result of differing customs and circumstances which are what leave the human imprint on language. Custom, in Mulcaster's view is what preserves the best and defining quality or "nature" of language. It is the link between the diachronic and synchronic, process and product. For Mulcaster language was tradition, and custom

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations are from E.T. Campagnac's 1925 edition of *The Elementarie*.

the force which gives it shape and meaning. This reevaluation of custom sharply diverged from the thinking of his time. It is true that the status of custom had enjoyed a period of prominence in the early decades of the century with the stand of the Cambridge humanists against unjustified and quixotic neologising. This group, Sir John Cheke, Sir Thomas Wilson and Roger Ascham championed custom as a conservative and purifying force to off-set the onslaught of indiscriminate borrowing. However, as the century's concerns turned to orthographical reform, custom began to get bad press and became loaded with negative connotations. This is particularly evident in the writings of the phonemic reformers, Sir Thomas Smith, John Hart, and William Bullokar, Mulcaster's immediate predecessors. Smith saw in custom the origin of the woes of English spelling. Hart dismissed custom as an irrational force which constituted the only barrier to the ascent of English to a state of perfection, a task which he felt he was carrying out in spite of the common man's misguided and leech-like attachment to custom. Bullokar follows in the same line, calling custom "ignorant". Mulcaster however, reverts to the classical acceptance of the term but, more importantly, raises it to the status of sound, together with reason, in the determination of "right writing".

This dethronement of sound as the sole arbiter in spelling reform is the second major departure from current practices and indicator of his modernity. Mulcaster was the first to realize that the letter does not stand in a symbolic relationship with sound. It is a sign, arbitrary and conventional in nature. "[Letters] perform their function not by themselves or anie vertew in their form ... but onlie by consent of those men, which first did invent them, and the pretie use thereof perceived by those, which first did name them" (102). De Saussure expressed the same idea thus: "la escritura no es un vestido, sino un disfraz" (1945: 79). If the letter is a sign of a sound, then there is no need to "to chop, to change, to alter, to transport, to enlarge, to lessen, to make, to mar, to begin, to end" (79). Mulcaster therefore, unlike his contemporaries, did not regard language as the picture of sound, an analogy which appears, beginning with Smith's "ut pictura, ortografia", in all the treatises on spelling reform of the century. Hart urged that we "write as we speak" and Bullokar complained about the imperfect "picturing" of the English alphabet. Mulcaster's analysis of English spelling initiated the path down which all subsequent spelling reform movemnets would travel. Deep rooted and radical reform which went back to the roots of the language would be rejected in favour of his approach. The role of the reformer was thus redefined and the nature of reform substantially modified. The reformer became the codifier and regulator, not the innovator. Reform became the search for analogies and correspondences within the material already available in the language. Moreover, the role of tradition was magnified. Reforms in Mulcaster's opinion should be carried out within the parameters and on the principles already present in the language thus respecting what in the eighteenth century was called its "genius". All this took place in the viscous matrix of change.

This is the third point of originality which emerges in *The Elementarie*: the concept of change. From early Christian times change had been seen as the herald of doom, the process which brought the day of judgement and universal decay one step nearer. This defines the attitude to change in the Renaissance and indeed beyond. Samuel Johnson sums it up succinctly, "All change is evil". The efforts of the phonemic reformers were not confined simply to the correction of spelling. They also harboured the hope that, once their reforms had been implemented, the language in its perfect state would cease to change. Bullokar seemed confident that "a perfectnesse now surely planted, not to be rooted out as long as letters endured" would be the result of the implementation of his reforms. (1581: 2). Mulcaster, in contrast, was aware that those changes which he suggested would disappear down the gullet of time, that is, his amendments would hold up only until the language changed in response to new social needs and cultural conditions. Moreover, he seems to have been aware that change is a principle of language and not merely a response to extralinguistic forces. He sees change as a neutral force, the consequences of which could be either positive or negative, depending on the response of man. He thus shakes off the yoke of fatalism and places man as the controller of his fate.

I have outlined above the three main differences between Mulcaster and his contemporaries and they are differences which link him more closely to modern linguistic thought than to the sixteenth century. This begs the question as to why his work has lain in relative obscurity both

immediately succeeding its publication and in the following centuries. As Leo Wiener states, "His contemporaries did not appreciate him; the men of the succeeding centuries have entirely forgotten him" (1897: 66).

It was not until the late 19th and the beginning of this century that there was a renewed interest in Mulcaster and this focused primarily on his work as a pedagogue. R. H. Quick edited *Positions* in 1888 and was largely responsible for the dissemination of his educational theories giving him an undisputed place in the development of English pedagogy.<sup>1</sup> It was as an educationalist that Continental scholars also wrote on Mulcaster.<sup>2</sup> His second facet, that of linguist and spelling reformer has been relatively neglected as the following critical survey shows.

The first major study of Mulcaster's work is to be found in Ellis (1869-1874) in his *On Early English Pronunciation*. Ellis recognised that Mulcaster was not a reformer in the same sense as his contemporaries were. In fact, he throws little light on the subject of pronunciation but then, his objective was other: "Mulcaster's objective in short was to teach, not the spelling of sounds, but what he considered the neatest style of spelling as derived from custom, in order to avoid the great confusion which then prevailed" (910). This explains the defects that Dobson would later find in his work and his labelling him as a poor and sloppy phonetician. Mulcaster's merit lies in his ambitious plan to integrate all those factors which influence spelling, identify them in current practice and formulate guidelines.

At the turn of the century we find the first reference to Mulcaster in his capacity as linguist. Leo Wiener published a short article on the Elizabethan philologist in *Modern Language Notes* in 1897, with the declared purpose of "opening for him the gates of the histories of language and literature" (70) but he is absent in this role from the critical reviews until R. F. Jones analysed his attitude to the English language in an article in *Washington University Studies* in 1926. In J. L. Moore's 1910 work on the perceptions of the language in the Tudor and Stuart periods, Mulcaster is conspicuous by his absence. While Moore does mention him it is only to note that the manuscript of *The Elementarie* was not available to him, a fact which speaks for itself.

This lack was made good by R. T. Campagnac who provided an edition of *The Elementarie* in 1925. However, his interest lay in the christian humanist features found in the work and only two pages of the thirty-three page introduction make reference to Mulcaster's work on language and then, in reference to his style. Campagnac however, does point out that he was a man who knew how to apply the old and traditional learning to new times and purposes and sees in this combination of scholar and man of the world the prototype of the Renaissance humanist.

It was Richard Mulcaster ..., who most loudly proclaimed the equality of the vernacular with the classic languages, most earnestly asserted its independence of them and most confidently urged its widest use. (Jones 1953, 192).

This is R. F. Jones' verdict on Mulcaster. His first article on Mulcaster appeared some 27 years before his excellent work and source of references for the period *The Triumph of the English Language*. Jones' analysis of *The Elementarie* has concentrated on the attitudes towards the English language expressed therein rather than on specific details of the proposed spelling reforms. He is impressed by the breadth of vision, the pragmatic approach and the consistency of Mulcaster's arguments and lays special stress on "the startling modernity of some of his theories" seeing in him the union of common sense with a vision far ahead of his contemporaries. He mixes the conservative with the progressive: "He interests us today because his is the most significant pronouncement on the English language in the Elizabethan period" (1926, 268). Jones finds in Mulcaster a kindred spirit, sharing his view that it would be foolish to put a scientific straightjacket on such a virile thing as the English tongue. Jones' interest lies, I think, in the

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<sup>1</sup> Foster Watson's *Mulcaster and Ascham* (1899), James Oliphant's *Educational Writings of Richard Mulcaster* (1903) and numerous publications by R.H. Quick illustrate this point.

<sup>2</sup> The two major works on Mulcaster in German are: Theodor Klähr's *Leben und werke Richard Mulcaster's eines englischen Pädagogen*, 1893 and Cornelia Benndorf's *Die englische Pädagogik*, 1905.

philosophy of ideas, not phonetics and he pays no more than passing attention to the details of his reforms other than to praise their common sense. This same verdict is offered by Baugh (1978) who points out the moderation and practical nature of the proposals.

Renwick, writing in the 1920s, like Jones, focuses on Mulcaster's philosophy of language and demonstrates the parallelism between Du Bellay's *Deffence et Illustration* and *The Elementarie*. He has the following to say of Mulcaster "his own share in the improvement of the mother tongue was the normalizing of English spelling but there is abundant evidence of keen interest in the larger problems, and careful study" (282-3).<sup>1</sup> This remark focuses on two fundamental points: the comprehensive scope of his writing and the identification of the key issues in language development and reform.

Mulcaster is presented in a complementary (if not complimentary) and contrasting light by Dobson (1968) in his seminal work on English pronunciation. He offers the view of the phonetician and prefaces his analysis by saying that Mulcaster had no understanding of phonetics: "Mulcaster's work is on the whole disappointing ... He misunderstood the aims of the phonemic reformers ... His arguments against the thorough reform of English spelling cannot be said to show any real understanding of the matter" (1968, 222-223). Dobson evidently finds little to recommend Mulcaster as a phonetician. This judgement is founded on a number of points, chief among which are Mulcaster's confusion between length and stress and the lack of clarity of his diacritics. His categorization of consonants into mutes and half vowels is deemed unphonetic although it was a widely accepted classification used by teachers in the period. Dobson's main criticism concerns Mulcaster's retention of numerous traits of his northern speech and he concludes that he had not, in spite of having spent all of his professional life in the South, come to a full understanding of Standard spelling conventions. In the same vein, the "Generall Table" is pronounced incomplete for Dobson's purposes as the spellings given are of little value as indicators of pronunciation. Having argued forcibly against Mulcaster as a phonetician, Dobson goes on to detract from his status as an innovator, attributing his theories to a clever anticipation of ideas that were already current or having captured, magpie-like, an unvoiced popular feeling.

Scragg (1974) views the writer in a more favourable light. As the voice of reason and moderation in an age gripped by "the sound and the fury", his main distinction lies in having made the first attempt to marshal the case against reform thus anticipating the direction that similar movements in the 17th century would take. He codified existing conventions and formulated rules for learning them. He also makes the important point that while Mulcaster's concerns were pedagogic Hart and Smith's were scientific and academic respectively.

The above review bears witness to the surprisingly little attention that he has attracted as a linguist. With the exception of R. F. Jones, he has been dealt with as educational theorist and phonemic reformer, his important contribution to the theory of language being either ignored or undervalued. How can this be accounted for?

The first hypothesis to be examined is that suggested by R.F. Jones, that it was his stature as a pedagogue which paradoxically caused his linguistic theories to recede into second place. Not only was Mulcaster headmaster of the most important schools in London, but he also enjoyed a position of prominence at court and *Positions* was dedicated to Queen Elizabeth. It was as a pedagogue that he was chiefly recognised and his stature as such can be deduced from his intense rivalry with Roger Ascham. Mulcaster was granted the licence to publish *Positions* on the condition that the book "containe [no] thing prejudiciall or hurtfull to the booke of maister Askam" (Quick 1888, 305-6). This personal rivalry with Ascham who had been Elizabeth's tutor and continued in later life as her secretary and the radical nature of the reforms he proposed, it is suggested, distracted attention from his philosophy of language.

It is interesting to note that it was from the commercial and not the intellectual sector that Mulcaster received immediate recognition. His spelling recommendations were adopted by

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<sup>1</sup> Renwick maintains that the English were indebted to the Pléiade as regards coining, neologizing and reviving.

Richard Field, successor to William Vautrollier, Mulcaster's printer and head of a well respected establishment in London. His success with the printers is due to the practicality and simplicity of the amendments he suggested. They did not, for example require the manufacture of new type face and satisfied the printer's commercial need for a public standard. Moreover, those who followed him, the compilers of spelling books, tables and dictionaries freely borrowed from his work without recognising their sources - a common practice in the sixteenth century when the concept of author was straddling the transitional period from medieval anonymity to modern deification. Mulcaster's influence was therefore, indirect and unrecognised.

A second postulation as to why Mulcaster's ideas fell on unreceptive ears lies in their modernity. "Mulcaster was easily forgotten and overlooked because he was too advanced for his time. The fact is, in the sixteenth century there was no one to compare him with" (Wiener, 1897: 69). His optimistic vision of change, the reinstatement of custom, his radical rejection of sound as the sole basis for spelling reform and the consequences that this brought, broke with the mood of the era. He in fact marked the beginning of a new period. He was on the bridge between past and present, caught between two centuries, two stages in the growth of English. His ideas on custom were gradually accepted and flourished in the seventeenth century. His successor at St. Pauls, Alexander Gill, Ben Jonson and William Camden grant custom a similar authority to that shown in *The Elementarie*. His concept of change was slower in being accepted and even suffered a reversal in the eighteenth century, when it became arch-enemy number one. However, as confidence in man's ability to shape his own destiny grew with the age of reason, the shackles of fatalism were loosened. It was not until George Hakewell's 1627 treatise on the responsibility of man in the universal scheme of things that we find the clearest echo of Mulcaster's voice. Mulcaster was sharply aware that he was breaking schemes and that his work would be ill received. He states "... I am also most redie with all pacience to digest all such difficulties, all such thwartings, as that kind of wish ... to chek and choke a writer" (3), but is content to await the judgement of posterity - which in itself has been slow in delivering a verdict.

There is a third hypothesis as to why Mulcaster has suffered such neglect and that is that he has traditionally been discussed in relation to the phonemic reformers of his time. The earliest reference is Ellis in the mid nineteenth century. The status of Ellis' work and the fact that the material therein was used freely and often unquestioningly by many other writers on phonetics, has led to regarding Mulcaster in this block, much to his detriment. He was not a phonetician and, in this role, is overshadowed by Hart, the first true English phonetician. Even the "muddle headed"<sup>1</sup> Bullokar is granted more book space than Mulcaster. The fact is that the phoneticians sought in his work what simply was not there. His purpose was not to provide a description of English sounds. He states very clearly that his objectives are "the correction of certain wants, and general direction for the whole pen" (7) The key words are *certain* and *general*. Moreover, he sacrificed phonetic accuracy at the shrine of practicality. *The Elementarie* was written for schoolteachers, for use in teaching. His concern was to provide rules and establish norms for use which could be formulated in a language intelligible to all.

The general presentation and novelty of the educational reforms may have blinded the critics to the rationale behind them as Jones (1953) suggests but the blame for his neglect lies, more probably in a combination of misclassification on the part of the critics and the very modernity of his ideas. These two facts have diverted attention away from his theory of language which, seen through the prism of the late twentieth century, has much of relevance to us today. Perhaps it is time for a fuller evaluation and deeper study of this forgotten figure on the bridge between two centuries.

#### REFERENCES

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<sup>1</sup> This is the term used by Otto Jespersen to describe Bullokar's intricate and highly complex spelling reforms.

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