In Memory of Jimmy Britton
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In Memory of Jimmy Britton

It is with deep sadness and affection that we acknowledge the death of Jimmy Britton, Emeritus Professor of Education, University of London, on February 28, 1994.

Born in Scarborough, England, on May 18, 1908, Jimmy graduated with a B.A. honors degree in English from University College London, where he held the Campbell Clarke Scholarship and the John Oliver Hobbes Memorial Scholarship. His "first act of insurrection"—publication of *English on the Anvil*, a grammar book meant to replace the unproductive busywork promoted by the texts currently in use—came between 1930-1938, the time when he taught English in several state secondary schools.

Jimmy left his teaching post in 1938 to become education editor for the publishers John Murray of London, and soon afterward, took leave of his wife Roberta, an art teacher and watercolor artist who was a colleague at the school where he began his teaching, to serve with the RAF in World War II. *Record and Recall: A Cretan Memoir* (1988) details an episode in his war experiences. With a small group of companions, he barely managed to escape being captured by German paratroopers who invaded the island of Crete where he helped to staff a radar station in 1941. Jimmy often referred to this experience when he spoke of what really mattered in life.

Returning from overseas, Jimmy rejoined John Murray for several years before completing his M.A. at the University of London. Between 1948-1952, while he was studying, he also taught education at the Birmingham College of Art, where he "found the students possessed of a creative vitality that, for a time, made English seem dull as a timetable subject and English teachers appear trapped in a sober servicing routine." Moved by this insight, Jimmy devoted the rest of his life to championing the creative aspects of English. Contributing to this mission, in 1957, he published *The Oxford Books of Verse for Juniors*, recognizing poetry as a central human experience.

In 1954, Jimmy joined the English Education Department at the University of London Institute of Education where he was to spend the rest of his career. He became Reader in Education, head of the department, and was eventually honored as the Goldsmiths Professor. During the 1970s, he headed a major research group (including colleagues Nancy Martin and Harold Rosen) for the British Schools Council, which examined the instructional role of writing in the British Schools. This led to the publication of

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The Development of Writing Abilities, 11-18 in 1975 and the refinement of his theory of language use, which accounted for the distinction between participant and spectator language roles. This work helped teachers to see the importance of having students use expressive language and alerted us to the crucial role of audience in the development of language competence and confidence. At this time, Jimmy was also an active member of the Bullock Committee, which issued its influential report, *A Language for Life*, in 1975.

In his classic study *Language and Learning* (1970; 2nd Ed., 1992), Jimmy published his most fully developed statement about the relationship between children's active language use and their learning. Drawing on extensive samples of actual speech and writing done by his two daughters when they were growing up (Celia Britton, Professor of French, University of Aberdeen, Scotland, and Alison Britton, one of England's leading ceramic artists), Jimmy showed how individuals continually use words to make both practical and moral sense of the world. He also helped to introduce, and make accessible, key thinkers in the area of language, identity, and society, from George Kelly to Lev Vygotsky.

Continuing to develop his theoretical work, Jimmy introduced us to notions such as "shaping at the point of utterance" and probed the relationships between language and memory. In 1982, his selected essays appeared in Prospect *and Retrospect*; and finally, with his last book *Literature in Its Place* (1993), Jimmy returned to his first love: the importance of poems and stories in our lives. Bringing the generations full circle, in this last book Jimmy illustrates some of his ideas with telling language samples from his two granddaughters, Laurie and Lucy. To the end of his life, he focused on the ways that language makes us most human.

In 1989, at its spring gathering in Colorado Springs, the Conference on English Education sponsored a session in which Jimmy read a number of his poems. Enthusiastic response encouraged him to gather together the verse he had written over more than fifty years. Fortunately, shortly before he died, he was able to see *The Flight-Path of My Words: Poems 1940-1992* in print.

Owing to his wide international reputation, Jimmy served as a visiting scholar in numerous institutions around the English-speaking world. In 1963, he worked with teachers in South Africa and later he traveled to Australia to advise and consult. In Canada, he was especially associated with the University of British Columbia, the University of Calgary, and the Ontario Institute of Education. In the United States, he spoke at numerous NCTE conferences and held many visiting professorships, notably at Bread Loaf and New York University. The University of Calgary awarded him an honorary LL.D., and he received NCTE's David H. Russell award for Distinguished Research in the Teaching of English. A collection, *The*

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Word for Teaching Is Learning, was published in 1988 to honor his eightieth birthday. In addition, the Conference on English Education recognizes Jimmy's important influence on English teachers throughout the world by annually selecting a winner of the James N. Britton Award for Inquiry in English Language Arts.

Perhaps the most important gift of Jimmy's imagination and talent for us practicing teachers of the English language arts is the work he did to bring us together in professional networks. In 1947, he helped establish the London Association for the Teaching of English (L.A.T.E.), which eventually led to the founding of N.A.T.E. in 1963. His commitment to helping initiate and sustain an international conversation among teachers of English began with his important role as part of the British delegation to the Dartmouth Conference of 1966. In 1971, at the University of York, Jimmy was a key supporter of the first grassroots International Conference with its call for language and writing across the curriculum. In 1984, he edited *English Teaching: An International Exchange* for the International Federation for the Teaching of English (IFTE).

At the Third International Conference on the Teaching of English held in Sidney in 1980, Jimmy gave the James McAuley Memorial Lecture. His words then anticipated the hard times ahead for educational reform, times when respect for children's voices would decline. Still, Jimmy spoke deliberately, when he said, "I am not pessimistic. I pin my hopes to quiet processes and small circles in which I believe I shall see, if I'm still alive at the end, vital and transforming events taking place." We remember Jimmy for bringing people together in quiet ways. He listened to us, attended to us, and he left us experiencing the satisfactions of literature and feeling the power of our own language.

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