

# THE TROUBLESOME DIPHTHONG

(Written for "The Listener" by PROFESSOR ARNOLD WALL)

[1]

IT is not long since many listeners, perhaps the majority of those who happened to hear a particular broadcast of the news, got a mild shock when they heard the name of the Swiss town "Lausanne" pronounced with the "Lau-" as "Low" in "allow," instead of "Loh," which of course it should be. The trouble with this diphthong, the cause of many such blunders, is that it has three different values according to the language to which a given word belongs, or from which it derives. These three values are well illustrated by the name "Paul," which in English is "Pawl," in French "Pohl," and in German and some other languages, "Powl," rhyming with "howl." In words which are straight-out English we have no difficulty, except in one group presently to be mentioned, for the sound is normally that which we give it in e.g. "taut," "haul," or "Saul"; nobody can well go wrong in any of these. So also, words which are unmistakably French give us little or no trouble, e.g. "au naturel," "au revoir," "cause célèbre," "hauteur," "Sauterne," or well-known names like "Gautier," "Maupassant" and so on, for only the very illiterate would say "ow natural," or "Mowpassant." Words which are obviously German, similarly, do not bother people much, e.g. "Faust," "frau," names ending in "-baum," or Richard "Tauber," in all of which the "au" has the same value as in Latin, Maori, and many other languages. In the little discussion which follows, I will use the spelling "aw" to represent the English value, "oh" for the French, and "ow," as in "now," for the German, Latin, Maori, etc.

The sad mistakes which occur so often in the use of this diphthong in New Zealand are due partly to simple ignorance, whether of the language in question, or of the geographical origin of a name, or of the "Englishness" of a word which has been adopted from some other language and may or may not have become naturalized in sound. For instance, one often hears a French word

such as "gauche" pronounced with the sound of "ow"—"gowsh" instead of "gohsh"—when the speaker either does not know that the word is French or what the sound of "au" in French should be. Then we hear such sinful pronunciations as "Lowsanne," above mentioned, the speaker not knowing, or ignoring, the fact that the town is in French Switzerland. An example of doubtful naturalization is "Vaudeville," which, though so perfectly and unmistakably French in form, is very often to be heard as "Vawde—" instead of "Vohde—" In New Zealand, where every one is familiar with many Maori words and names containing this sound, always as "ow," such as "raupo," "Te Aute," "Rauparaha," and where the "continental" pronunciation of Latin has been taught for generations, the natural tendency is, when in doubt, to give the "au" the sound of "ow," even when the Latin word or name has been so perfectly anglicised as to leave no Englishman in any doubt. People here will say, for instance, "Centowrus" for "Centawrus." I should not be much surprised to hear the name "Laura" as "Lowra," or "Maud" as "Mowd." An instructive case of this kind is the name "Gauden." Its French form is "Gaudin," pronounced, of course, as "Gohdang," approximately; but as an English name, whether spelt "Gauden" or "Gaudin," the pronunciation should be "Gawden." We may be sure that the famous author of "Eikon Basilike" was never called "Gowden," yet people in New Zealand who bear this name have to answer to "Gowden" whether they like it or not.

## "The King's English"

Before giving a selection of words and names which may, and often do, cause trouble, I will deal briefly with the much-discussed "lahnch" (or "lawrch") and the group to which it belongs. It is a pretty large group of words, with "aun" in them—including, for instance, "daunt," "vaunt," "saunter," "laundry," "maunder," "taunt," "gaunt," and, all alone in her glory, "aunt." When it was first used in English, mostly in words of French origin, "au" had its phonetic value, as it has in Maori, and was sounded as our "ow" in "now." It normally developed into the sound of "aw," as in "taut," but in this group the sound was "ahn"; it retained this sound in all the words of the class, or nearly all, till the early nineteenth century, when the new fashion began and the sound "aw" gradually established itself in "standard English" though the older pronunciation never quite died out. The obstinate "aunt" refused to conform and retains to this day, unchallenged and triumphant, the traditional sound. The late King George V., on a public occasion, "lahnched" a ship, instead of "lawrchng" her, and ever since that time, whether or not this august example was new to listeners, this pronunciation has rapidly gained ground. It was described at the time, when it attracted much attention, as being "old-fashioned" but not "wrong." The BBC recommends "lawrch" to its announcers; the best authorities allow both "lawrch" and "lahnch." In spite of the recommendation, all listeners to broadcasts from home must have noticed that

"lahnch" is often to be heard from the announcers. Time alone can show which of the rival pronunciations will prevail. But, let it be noted, if we are to be consistent (which we rarely are in such matters), and if we are to say "lahnch," then we should also say "lahndry," "sahnter," "gahnt," "tahnt," and so on; with the possible exception of "lahndry" I think these are never to be heard.

(To be continued)

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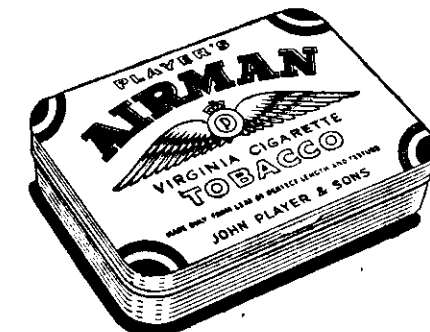
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(Continued from previous page)

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