

MRS. ROOSEVELT SPOKE ENGLISH

(Written for "The Listener" by KAY)

IT must have interested others as much as it did me to notice that Mrs. Roosevelt spoke English, and nothing but English. Her accent was American, of course, but her words were all out of the O.E.D. I don't recall one exception. We hardly flatter the American people when we think of their speech as a crude and slangy caricature of our own. Both languages have sprung from a common stem, and, just as French and Italian may be described as divergent

forms of Latin, American and English may be regarded as divergent forms of modern English.

You will find the facts if you turn to H. L. Mencken, whose *American Language*, published in 1936, is a standard work, and, unlike many such tomes, of a great liveliness.

A language spoken by so many millions cannot possibly be ignored, especially a language so much on the move, so alive, so lusty, and for ever developing. In Elizabethan days we had just such an exuberance, but since then our tendency has been to slow up

tucker, for keeps, no flies on, under the weather, low and high-brow, phoney. This week I heard a BBC announcer talking about train-busting.

How it Happens

This is how it happens. The first schooner ever seen was launched at Gloucester, Mass., in 1713. The word was originally spelt Scooner. To Scoon was borrowed from the Scottish dialect and meant to skim or skip across the water like a flat stone. As the first schooner left the ways and glided into Gloucester Harbour, an enraptured spectator shouted, "O see how she scoons." "A scooner let her be," replied her builder, Captain Andrew Robertson, and all boats of her class took the name thereafter. Anyhow, that story has some authority.

So the word "Yankee" was apparently first applied, not to the English, but to the Dutch. As early as 1683 it was discovered that Yankey was a common nickname among buccaneers who ranged along the Spanish Main and the men who bore it were Dutchmen.



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At a guess I would say that it is just because Mrs. Roosevelt is prepared to offer to an interested world anything and everything that she has to give. She has no illusions about her position as First Lady. She knows that all she does is inevitably of great interest to a large number of Americans. Very well, if people want to know how she lives and who she meets and what she says, she will tell them herself. They will find that the life of this First Lady is an exceeding full, happy, and interesting one, and it is she herself who makes her life what it is.

THIS is perhaps the special message to all women that Eleanor Roosevelt would like to give: that life is not something that is thrust upon you to enjoy or endure, but that, whether you live in fisherman's cottage or White House, it is something to which every woman can make her own contribution. She believes that women have an immensely important part to play in shaping the world of the future and that they have the right to play an equal part with men. "All the same I am hoping that women do not think their contribution is the same as men's," she says. "Women's contribution is different. The natural approach of women is with a greater interest on the human side." I would suspect that successful as Mrs. Roosevelt is as First Lady, as unofficial ambassador, as social worker, as feminist, and as journalist, she thinks of herself first and foremost as a wife and mother. She has reared five children and her heart is still with them, and her face lights up when one or other of them is mentioned.

A STORY is told by a British journalist who, on his visit to America last year, was given the privilege of a personal interview with Mrs. Roosevelt. He thought he had his story ahead of anyone else—but he was wrong. The next day he found that it was Mrs. Roosevelt who had been interviewing him and that her story was being read all over the States.

While not important in itself, this is a sidelight on Mrs. Roosevelt's ability to get the best out of any situation. She does not fuss, she does not appear to assert her will; there is no need. I could imagine her knocking up a meal in a kitchen or settling down to island life after a shipwreck. She would meet any situation with courage and her inimitable smile, but she would never show discourtesy, unkindness or despair.

—S.S.

Pro-Americans in England

According to Mencken the pro-American party is still small in England, although the war may have made a difference. Robert Bridges was in sympathy, also Wyndham Lewis, Edward Shanks and Virginia Woolf. "The Americans," Mrs. Woolf said, "are doing what the Elizabethans did—coining new words and instinctively making the language adapt itself to their need."

G. B. Shaw goes further. The English, he says, have no respect for their language—an honest and natural slum dialect is more tolerable than the attempt of a phonetically untaught person to imitate the vulgar dialect of the golf club.

Many will be amazed to find that such words as "reliable," "talented," "influential," "lengthy," "belittle" are all Yankee neologisms and were stoutly resisted when they made their first appearance in the early nineteenth century.


The American humorists who flourished after the Civil War broke down many barriers. Bret Harte, and Mark Twain most of all, made the English public familiar with the pungent neologisms of the West, and as a result many bright words were taken into our speech. They have been gradually seeping in ever since, and with the coming of the American talkies, resistance was no longer possible. For instance, "speed cop" has more tang in it than "mobile police" and "cow-catcher" than "plough."

Even in the Commons

Even those of us who loathe American speech most can hardly avoid using American terms. Galsworthy uses "make good" and "cold feet." Sir Arthur Quiller Couch uses "rubberneck," Lowes Dickenson "nothing doing," and Masfield "to cough up."

And even in the House of Commons, Mr. Baldwin, one of the masters of the King's English, used "backslider," "best-seller," "deliver the goods," "Whoopie," "debunked," "you're telling me" have sometimes been heard in the House of Commons lobby. We are so used to "platform," "electioneer," "racketeer," "wirepuller," "foolproof," and "on the fence" that we scarcely notice them.

Here are a few more of the many hundreds of American-origin colloquialisms: bee-line, dug-out, dumb-bell, slick, schoolmarm, the cat's pyjamas, bluff, take the cake, bark up the wrong tree, cut no ice, fizzle out, keep a stiff upper-lip, fly off the handle, bury the hatchet, raise Cain, not my funeral, best bib and



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