

Simplified Spelling and Reed College

William Trufant Foster, the first President of Reed College, was a strong supporter of reforming the spelling of the English language. In 1909, while a professor at Bowdoin College, Maine, he was on the Advisory Council of the Simplified Spelling Board as well as being the Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Maine Center of the Simplified Spelling Board. When he was appointed President of Reed in 1910, he brought his convictions about spelling with him.

Due to Foster's influence, simplified spelling was used in many of the college publications. Perhaps the most notable was Reed's first yearbook from 1915. The students of the initial graduating class compiled it and included an explanatory note on the verso of the title page that read:

Note—The simpler, briefer and more fonetic forms of English spelling recommended in the first four lists of the Simplified Spelling Board ar used thruout this volume.

This publication confused readers then and continue to do so today; some think that these early students were woefully bad spellers. What follows is a sample paragraph from that first yearbook:

The bildings and equipment, tho necessarily inadequate in some cases to meet the demands which a more extensiv college plant would fil, ar modern and first-clas in every respect. The whole plan of grounds and bildings for the Reed College of the future, with the advantage of location and the sanity with which the first steps wer pland for foundations, presents unequald opportunities for artists and filanthropists.

Other publications that reflect Foster's simplified spelling influence for the period of 1911 through 1919 are the student newspaper—the *Quest*, the *1916 Yearbook*, and many official college documents. Number 1 of the *Reed College Record* for March, 1911, notes that it "...starts out with simplified spellings—tho, altho, thoro, thoroly, catalog, program, addrest, publisht, thru, thruout" (from *Simplified Spelling Bulletin*, Vol. II:4, March 1911). It is interesting to note that several of these words have become commonly accepted today.

Besides influencing the college publications, President Foster wrote articles and gave talks in support of the new system. For instance, he addressed the annual meeting of the Inland Empire Teachers Association in Spokane, Washington, in April 1913, with a talk entitled "The Economics of Spelling Reform." At least one

Reed faculty member, Professor George H. Danton of German in 1915/1916, also supported the new spelling, and in fact served on the Advisory Council of the Simplified Spelling Board in 1913.

The Simplified Spelling Board was created in 1906 by Andrew Carnegie, who supported it for twelve years. In an article in *The New York Times*, he stated that he believed “English might be made the world language of the future” and thus encourage universal peace. However, its role was hindered by its “contradictory and difficult spelling” (NYT, 3/12/06). Many people adopted this idea besides Foster, including Mark Twain and William Dean Howells. In 1916, the Simplified Spelling Board restated its mission in the following manner:

The purpose of the movement is to hasten the process of rational orthographic change, to guide it in the direction of simplicity and economy; and gradually to substitute for our present caotic (sic) spelling, which is neither consistent nor etymologic, a simpler and more regular spelling, based on existing rules and analogies, and in harmony with the history and genius of the language.

By 1918, Carnegie gave up on the idea, since even the Carnegie Institution of Washington, D.C., did not use it in their reports. He wrote to the Board saying “I think I have been patient long enough...I have a much better use for Twenty-five thousand dollars a year.”

By Mark Kuestner and Gay Walker, May 2009