

This Place Matters

Samuel S. Haldeman and Nineteenth-Century Linguistics/Philology

By Jordan D. Marché II

Samuel S. Haldeman's diverse accomplishments in the field of natural science (which include numerous papers and monographs on conchology, entomology, and even archaeology) are well recognized today. But fewer people realize that he was equally, if not more, skillful in the study of linguistics, or, as it was better known in his own time, that of comparative philology. From 1868 until his death in 1880, Haldeman held the chair of Comparative Philology at the University of Pennsylvania, was the recipient of an honorary Doctor of Laws (LL.D.) degree from that institution (1876), and elected president of the American Philological Association (1876-77).

More than one factor was likely responsible for influencing Haldeman's pursuit of these studies. One is that he appears to have inherited or developed a very keen sense of hearing, perhaps related to his mother's musical training (though she died when Samuel was about 14 years old). He employed this 'gift' in his early studies of Native American dialects. Haldeman would travel on occasion to Washington, D.C. (during the 1840s) to hear the dialects spoken by visiting tribes or delegations, and this led to the publication of such papers as "On the Phonology of the Wyandots" (1845) and "On the Languages of the Aborigines of the Southwest" (1847). He reportedly delivered a series of lectures on various ethnographic dialects at the newly-founded Smithsonian Institution (at the request of Secretary Joseph Henry). These linguistic studies in turn led Haldeman to propose that a universal alphabet, or "system of phonography," be devised. One such early scheme, which attempted "to adapt the Roman Alphabet to exotic Languages," was outlined in 1845.

Haldeman's extensive work in natural history, and especially that in entomology (the study and classification of insects), had two other influences upon his linguistic analyses. The first, in the words of biographer P. C. Croll (1905), was that, "[o]wing to the constant use of the microscope[,] his eyesight was affected," and gradually led to his "abandonment of this kind of investigation." It was apparently for this reason that Haldeman applied his other keen sense to work in its place. But as noted by his long-time associate, geologist J. Peter Lesley (1886), in doing so, "his methods were always those of a naturalist," and Haldeman thus found himself "becoming, in fact, as so many geologists have become, a palaeolinguist," or someone who "looks upon words as life forms, and distinguishes them as fossil or recent." In 1853, immigrant Swiss naturalist Louis Agassiz (as quoted in Lesley) wrote to Haldeman, "I long to see your

work on etymology. I have always been delighted with the originality with which you treat these subjects.”

In coming years, Haldeman expanded the range of his linguistic studies among the ancient languages of Greek and Latin. Along the way, he published an influential volume, *Elements of Latin Pronunciation* (1857). He also produced analyses of Indo-European and Asian languages (1857). This research required extensive travel to Europe, chiefly in visits made to leading museums and libraries at London, Paris, and Rome, where he encountered all manner of spoken/written languages. Quoting Haldeman’s wife (Mary), Peter Lesley has noted that “[t]hese journeys were chiefly undertaken for the study of dialects and languages, in order to verify his theories of the sounds of the human voice.”

As a culmination/synthesis of these fact-gathering sprees, Haldeman, at the urging of his wife, submitted an essay to the 1858 contest sponsored by Sir Walter Trevelyan of England. Entitled “Analytic Orthography: An Investigation of the Sounds of the Human Voice, and their Alphabetic Notation,” his work was awarded the first prize over some sixteen leading European philologists. It was twice published in this country (first by the American Philosophical Society, in 1860, and issued again that same year as a separate volume). A *tour de force*, Haldeman’s contribution exhibited a mastery of some seventy different languages or dialects. Alexander J. Ellis, one of the contest’s judges, was quoted (by Lesley) as saying, “I found it one of the greatest intellectual treats which I have had for a long time.”

Having sampled (and mastered) a significant fraction of the world’s leading languages, Haldeman’s remaining linguistic studies returned largely to problems and issues associated with the English, Latin, and German-derived dialects. As his growing bibliography testified, these included such titles as *Affixes in Their Origin and Application* (1865). Reportedly at the request of the Philological Society of London, Haldeman prepared the volume, *Pennsylvania Dutch: A Dialect of South German with an Infusion of English* (1872). Another significant work, that represented an accumulation of many years’ study, was his *Outlines of Etymology* (1877). A final volume, *Word Building* (1881), was issued posthumously. Haldeman contributed an uncounted number of entries to various dictionaries, including that of Noah Webster, and furnished many reviews to scholarly publications. His linguistic/philological output amounted to over thirty titles.

*Jordan Marche, II is a former Board Member of the Haldeman Mansion Preservation Society, Inc an a former assistant Professor at Kutztown University. He has done extensive research on Samuel Steman Haldeman.