

## Great-Aunt Winifred series 2

### Return to Elocution

By Don Aitkin

It was a peaceful early evening. The news was mercifully over, and I was sufficiently relaxed to say to Great-aunt Winifred that from time to time, like tonight, I felt that we should call it 'Olds' rather than 'News'. I mean, everything on it was familiar: trouble in Iraq, interest rate worries, cricket scores, high-speed police chases, and so on.

My aunt likes word games like that, and I thought she might entertain me with one of her own.

'Indeed we could, nephew. It's like 'fashion shows', which present clothes that no woman in her right mind would think of wearing. They should be called "Unfashion shows".'

Good one, I thought.

'But that's not what is disturbing me.'

Whatever it was, I thought, I was bound to hear about it at once.

'Did you listen to our Ambassador to the UN carefully, nephew?'

'Senator Hill, as was?'

'The same.'

I thought that I had, and said so. 'He was on again about terrorists.'

'If only that were true. No, nephew. He is worried about "TERRIS".' She spelled out the word. 'In my day, to speak like that would have precluded his ever being considered for a Ministry. Standards in speech have slipped since Sir Robert's day.'

Here we go again, I thought. My aunt was something of an admirer of Australia's longest-serving Prime Minister, and she especially enjoyed his speeches and his speaking.

It was time for a bit of commonsense. 'Well, Aunt Winifred, I'm sure that Senator Hill is perfectly able to spell 'terrorists'. People who have a lot of public speaking to do have to think of their audience...'

That was a mistake. 'Good heavens, nephew! He is speaking to a national audience that includes ourselves. Surely he should be aiming to speak well, and indicate that he is an educated man.'

Now she was warmed up, and it was all my fault. 'And that leads me to another example of falling standards, nephew. What is the name of our country?'

'Well, Australia, of course.'

'Ah, so I would have said. But if you listen to Mr Albanese, the Shadow Minister for the Environment and Heritage, it's actually "STRAYER". There's no doubt about it. I heard him distinctly. And he's not the only one. Lots of men pronounce our country's name like that. Whatever school did they go to?'

In fact, I had heard Mr Albanese too and, I fancied, Mr Hewitt and Mr Ponting and other luminaries of the sporting world so describing our country. But Great-aunt Winifred was dropping into the persona of a primary school teacher, and that had to be stopped.

'My dear aunt! You are confusing our spoken language with our written language.'

'Not at all, nephew,' she said with some asperity. 'The one is the written or printed version of the other.'

Of course, I had her on toast, which was an event in itself.

'Well, dear aunt, why do we pronounce 'THOUGH' and THROUGH' differently?'

She was unfazed.

'The differences in pronunciation are in part why we need to go to school. But you are trying to change the subject. I am speaking about appalling pronunciation. Have you listened to Gerald recently?'

Great-aunt Winifred and I rather agree about Gerald, who is the problem child of our rather problematic family.

'What's he been up to?'

'What does he eat for lunch: a 'SANITCH', for heaven's sake. And what does he do when he comes home from school? He does his 'HOMERK'! You've heard him.'

Indeed I had, but she was, as usual, becoming obsessive about a small part of a large subject. I put on my most reassuring voice.

'All too true, dear aunt. But as you say, we go to school to learn these things, and even Gerald will win through in the end. People pronounce things differently, but they all learn to write them the same way. English is a puzzle, of course, as a language.' I let my voice trail away, a signal that we might move to another topic.

'Aha! So you say. But if we say things often enough, eventually the way we write them changes, too. And that's appalling.'

I should have asked her why that would be a bad thing. But, alas, I chose a different course.

'Give me just one example,' I demanded, with some confidence.

She smiled the victor's awful smile. 'It will interest you to know, nephew, that it is now permissible to spell 'GAOL' as 'JAIL'. The dictionaries have decreed it. There!'

Why I get into these discussions I will never know.

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