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KEIGHLEY PIONEERS OF  
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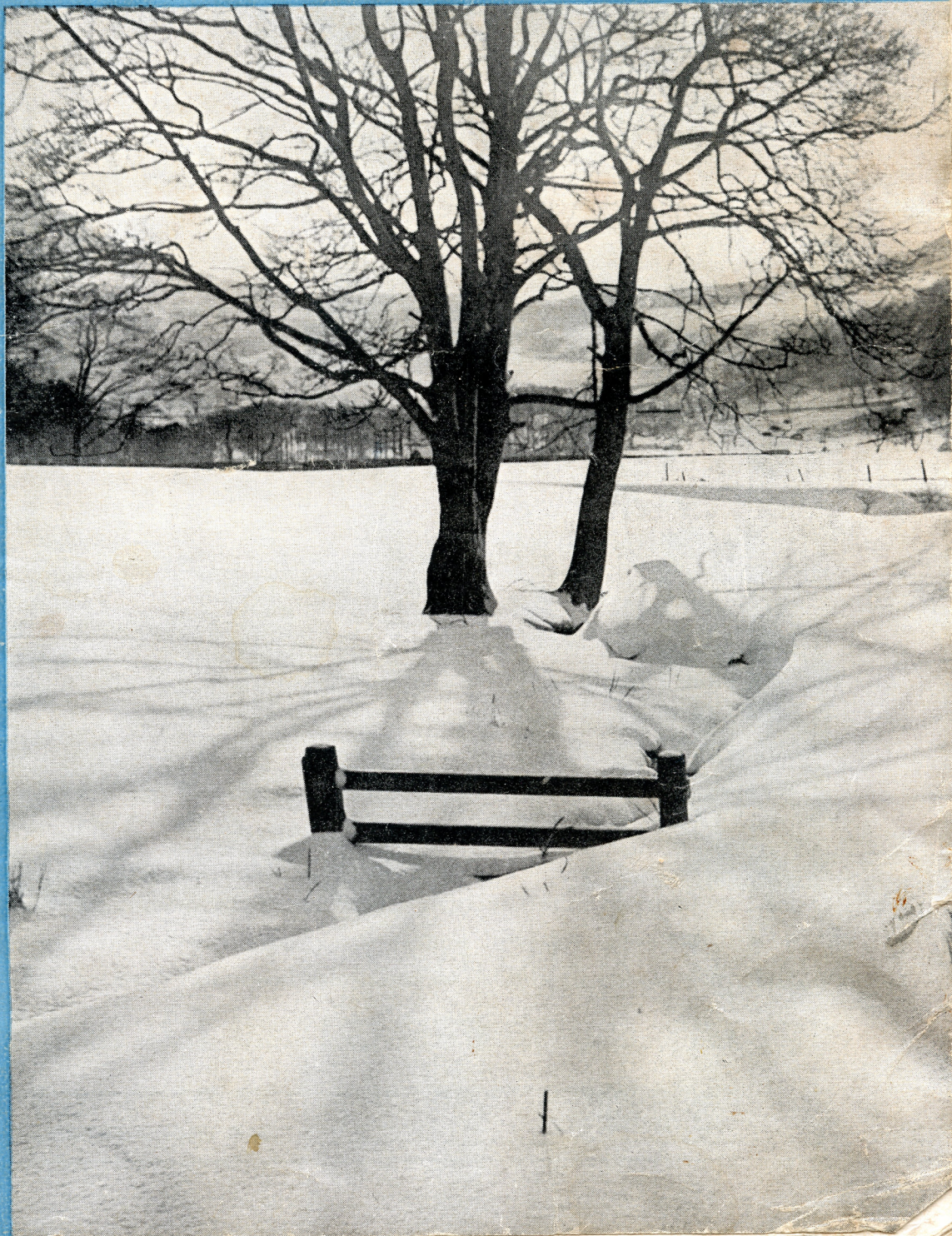
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# Keighley Pioneers of Esperanto by Kathleen H. Ashby



Joseph Rhodes

**I**N the Temperance Hall at Keighley, on Friday, November 7th, 1902, the cornerstone of the British organisation of an international movement was laid. Through the efforts of Joseph Rhodes, a local journalist, who worked for many years on the "Yorkshire Post" and John Ellis, a solicitor, the first British Esperanto club had been formed.

Rhodes and Ellis were idealists, who believed that the language problem was a barrier to understanding between peoples. The very same philosophy, wedded to the inter-racial strife that was part of the daily life of Ludovic Zamenhof, its inventor, had given birth to Esperanto.

Dr. Zamenhof was a Jew, whose formative years were spent in the town of Bielostok in Russian-occupied Poland. Daily, he saw incidents of persecution that were outward reflections of the racial hatred that seethed beneath the surface of the town's life. Although only a child he possessed a remarkable clarity of vision.

The idea of an international language obsessed his thoughts. He decided that a universal language must be neutral, artificial and simple.

While still at school he began the gigantic task of devising a world language. A gifted linguist, he knew that a great many words are common to several languages, so he first collected these root forms. They still form the basis of Esperanto vocabulary. That is why, if you have a smattering of a continental language besides a knowledge of English, you seldom encounter an Esperanto word that is entirely unfamiliar. "Hundo"—"dog" and "labori"—"to work" are but two examples that follow English forms closely. Yet still Zamenhof quailed before the mass of dictionaries that had to be sifted through. Then one day he noticed a street sign in his native tongue — "svejcarskaja" (porter's lodge or place of the porter) and nearby, "konditorskaja" (confectioner's shop or place of the sweets). The "skaja" riveted his attention. He realised that by the use of suffixes one word could be made into others that did not have to be learned separately. From this flash of inspiration Esperanto took shape.

From its inception Esperanto made steady progress. Esperanto groups sprang up in widely separated places on the continent and journals and books in the new language were published. Shortly after its formation, Dr. Zamenhof became honorary President of the Keighley club—a distinction unique among British clubs. Another decisive moment in the history of the club was the visit of Rhodes and Ellis to France in 1903 to prove their theoretical faith in the language by conversation with French esperantists. Their hopes were more than justified, and they proceeded to arrange a meeting with some London esperantists to discuss the formation of the British Esperanto Association, which came into being the following year. Rhodes and Ellis were among the British esperantists to attend the first International Congress at Boulogne in 1905, which proved beyond all doubt that Esperanto realised the expectations of its inventor in breaking down national barriers. For the first time in history, Frenchmen, Poles, Russians, Englishmen, Germans and representatives of many other



John Ellis

countries met together on equal terms, speaking a language they could all understand.

With the exception of the war years a Congress has been held annually ever since.

One of the most valuable contributions made by Joseph Rhodes to the movement was the compilation of the first English-Esperanto dictionary, (published 1908), which assisted thousands to a further knowledge of the language.

Officialdom, so far, has ignored Esperanto, but steps have been taken to place its claims before U.N.O. with a view to its adoption as an international language.

If, through legislation, or merely by assent, it could replace one of the national languages in the school curriculum, the next generation would be able to converse without difficulty with people of all nations, and the barriers of misunderstanding and suspicion would diminish. This goal, towards which Dr. Zamenhof, and the esperantists who have followed his lead, have been striving is not an idealist's dream but a practical possibility. Should it come to pass, Keighley, no doubt, will assume an honoured place in the annals of world history.