A Tribute to Louis Trimble

Louis Trimble died on March 9, 1988 at home in Totnes, Devon. I am glad that we gave him his festschrift* before he died. We said in the editor’s preface that Louis Trimble deserved a festschrift because he had a major personal influence on a whole generation of applied linguists and because he had made a major intellectual contribution to knowledge. We put it this way:

Louis Trimble some twenty years or so ago took the classical rhetoric of Aristotle et al. (e.g. ‘definition,’ ‘classification’ functions), applied these notions to a description of EST (English for Science and Technology) texts where they fit, modified these notions where they didn’t fit, and created an original rhetoric based on the notion of those ‘organizational choices’ the technical writer makes at various levels of ‘the rhetorical-process hierarchy’ in attempting to transmit technical information. (italics in original)

Louis was a person who never took himself too seriously. It amused him to be “a small part” of an “et al.” tradition in “Aristotle et al.” He ran a hog ranch and did ditch digging, house painting, and accounting in his early years, as Mary Todd Trimble described in her biographical introduction to the festschrift. I remember him regularly wearing a “western tie,” a beaded string, in the staid engineering college at the University of Washington. He wrote numerous science fiction, western and pulp novels. My favorite is entitled The Robe in the Galaxy (1970, NY: Ace Books); my favorite title is Just Around the Coroner (1948, NY: M.S. Mill Co.). They are now collector’s items.

I honestly believe I wouldn’t have this career if it weren’t for Louis. In the days when all of linguistics was sentence-bound, Louis worked with discourse and showed us that (to paraphrase Jakobson) linguistics without discourse is meaningless. He effortlessly integrated concerns for learning and teaching with a solid view of language. And on top of it all, with a fine critical mind, he behaved in his everyday life “like a mensch.” To Mary, we send our love and respects.

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