

**NICHOLAS JUSTIN ‘NICK’ ALLEN (1939-2020)**



*JASO* is extremely saddened to have to report the death of Nicholas Justin Allen, or ‘Nick’ as he was known to his friends, colleagues and generations of students, on 21 March 2020. Nick was a constant supporter of the journal, to which he entrusted some of his most important papers.

I first met Nick when I arrived at 51 Banbury Road in the autumn of 1976 to study for the Diploma in Social Anthropology. This was also Nick’s first year as a lecturer in what was then a quite modest size Institute of Social Anthropology compared to what its successor, the School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography, has become. In fact, I went there out of hours, and it was Nick who opened the door to me. I can’t now remember the rest of the meeting, but I clearly came away knowing that Nick was to be my tutor or ‘supervisor’ for the first year, which turned into many more years as I undertook a doctorate in anthropology under his supervision, and in a sense it never ended.

Nick provided an account of his own intellectual career for the journal *Ethnos* in 2003.<sup>1</sup> In it recalls his descent from British army officers and other officials in India and the interest of his father, by profession a civil servant, in Celtic numismatics and the British Academy, of which his father served as both Secretary and Treasurer. Nick traced his interest in research primarily to his father, but it was his mother who gave him his enthusiasm for mountains and for climbing them, which later influenced his decision to do fieldwork in Nepal. He then goes on to describe his schooling, initially in Hong Kong because of his father’s posting there, but continued upon his return to the UK at Rugby, which, like public schools everywhere at that time, seemed to the outsider both eccentric and unorganized in its teaching, but also potentially invigorating to those who knew how to take advantage of what it could offer. This

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<sup>1</sup> ‘From mountains to mythologies’, *Ethnos* 68/2 (2003), pp. 271-84.

gave Nick a classical background which at the time was of little interest to him. More immediately it led to some rather fitful medical training, partly at Oxford, that left him quite ambivalent about a medical career, which ultimately he was to reject as not for him. He then discovered a book on the multi-disciplinary Torres Straits Expedition of 1898, which had included experts in anthropology as well as more established disciplines and which gave his life a new direction. This discovery was made at the house of his maternal uncle, father of the late anthropologist Alfred Gell, who was therefore – and appropriately, given Nick's later interest in kinship – his mother's brother's son. Nick then returned to Oxford to do the same diploma I later took with him as his tutee, and he also joined the newly founded Linacre College, where he met his later wife Sheila.

Nick's supervisor for both the diploma and the initial stages of his doctorate, which followed, was Rodney Needham, from whom he later distanced himself while retaining a lot of Needham's intellectual influence. Partly for organizational reasons largely to do with Needham's absences abroad, even before the decisive break Nick had drifted away from him to obtain some supervision from Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf at SOAS and ended up finishing his doctoral thesis more or less on his own. While waiting to go to the field he visited Paris, where he met Louis Dumont and the Nepal specialist Sandy Macdonald, who also had a considerable intellectual influence on him, as well as attending lectures by Georges Dumézil, who had an even greater impact on his own later research. Then came fieldwork, which among other things confirmed Nick's growing interest in language and his increasing preference for diachronic over synchronic approaches to the social. This led later to an affinity with Marcel Mauss's ideas about world history, but at this point in time it was concentrated on another emerging interest, the anthropology of kinship from the point of view of terminological and other systemic change.

After returning from the field, getting married, finishing his doctorate and briefly working as a lecturer in Durham, Nick joined the Oxford staff in 1976, only to be caught up in internal conflicts surrounding Needham, who had been appointed to the Oxford chair in anthropology and became head of department the same year (also, as it happened, my own first year in the Institute). This is not the place to go into these conflicts, but they eventually led to Needham removing himself to his college, All Souls, during his first year in the professorship, after which he never set foot in the Institute again. This led to the management of the Institute being put into commission, with a rotating headship at which Nick took his turn, until John Davis took over the Oxford chair in 1990. 1976 was obviously a challenging and difficult year all round, trapping Nick, a new and somewhat under-confident lecturer,

between his old supervisor and those staff members, all senior to him, who had issues with Needham.<sup>2</sup> This led to Nick decisively distancing himself from the latter, as already mentioned, less because he knew on which side his bread was buttered than because he shared the distaste of many of his new colleagues for the way Needham was allegedly acting. Certainly the whole experience left him scarred for a long time afterwards.

However, things settled down in the Institute after Needham's departure, and Nick was able to carve out a place for himself in both teaching and research. Both ended up being very extensive: in addition to his tutorial teaching and lecturing, and occasional administrative duties at his new college Wolfson, where he did a stint as vice-gerent, he had large numbers of doctoral students, myself included, while his publishing activities proceeded apace as well.

Research-wise, looking back it is evident to me that Nick will be remembered for two bodies of work in particular among many others he contributed to on a more occasional basis. In kinship, his idea of tetradic society and tetradic kinship as an unattested but logical starting point in the world history of kinship terminologies found its niche among kinship aficionados and has influenced much subsequent work in this area, my own included, while not being short of critical responses.

Secondly, there is his suggested revision of Dumézil's tripartite model of social functions and their symbolic expression in myth among speakers of Indo-European languages, which preoccupied him more and more as time went on. Nick advocated adding a fourth, divisible function to this model, one that partly accounted for the more negative aspects of social life and/or forces external to it, and partly stood for the cosmo-social whole that brought together all the core functions; Nick's model could therefore also be seen as pentadic, not tripartite. Although he presented his ideas to Dumézil in Paris in the 1980s, the great man was not persuaded, though this did nothing to discourage a now more intellectually confident Nick from continuing along this path with, especially, large-scale comparisons between the *Mahabharata* and Homer's *Odyssey*, bringing him back full circle, in a sense, to his Classics studies at Rugby. Behind it all was also a fascination for the work, and intellectual excellence, of Marcel Mauss, on whose influential work he also wrote extensively and which formed a third pillar of his research interests in his own mind. I think it is true to say that if Nick had any intellectual hero, it was Mauss.

It also evident that, rather like Mauss, in his own writing Nick preferred the smaller compass of the article to the wider scope of the full-length book. This was partly due to his

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<sup>2</sup> Out of fairness, it should also be said that Needham had his defenders, and not every member of staff broke with him.

emphasis on meticulous, inductive scholarship, but I also suspect that he found planning a book-length work demanding in a way he did not in the case of a more condensed article. Certainly some books did appear, including two books on the Thulung Rai, with whom he did fieldwork in Nepal, and two collections mostly of previously published papers, one very recent; latterly he also acted occasionally as a co-editor of collected volumes. His articles, however, are works of distinction and imagination, one of the most imaginative being his *JASO* paper, 'A dance of relatives', which laid the groundwork for his later exposition of tetradic theory.<sup>3</sup> He was also a genuine stylist as a writer, with a way of expressing things that was not only clear and elegant but redolent with wise reflections and insights in a linguistic idiom that was all his own.

Retirement in 2001, slightly ahead of time, naturally ended Nick's official role as, by now, a reader in social anthropology, but he continued his research interests and publishing activities, and was a frequent attendee at institute seminars and functions, becoming known even to many later students who had never known him as a lecturer or supervisor and had only arrived at the Institute since his retirement. Indeed, Nick was an inveterate believer in the value of occasions like the traditional Friday seminar at the Institute as a short-cut way of keeping abreast with what was currently in the air. Unfortunately hearing problems later in life reduced the benefit of his attendance to him somewhat.

What was Nick like as a person? It is conventional in obituaries to describe one's subject honestly, warts and all, pulling no punches, but in Nick's case it is hard to fix on anything remotely negative. Normally reserved, even shy, and often giving a slight impression of awkwardness, he had a habit of rising from his chair at, say, coffee mornings or post-seminar sessions in the pub and walking off having finished what he wanted to say without so much as a nod of goodbye; I found that got a bit of getting used to. Some have suspected that he put this 'absent-minded professor' persona to good use in coping with his allotted tasks around the Institute. He could, however, get quite agitated when talking about Needham and his faults, and was extravagantly dismissive of some of the latter's later work: 'really very thin!' was his verbal reaction to me regarding one such book. A more dispassionate critical faculty was sometimes directed at other authors as well, decisively but never spitefully, and he avoided sheer polemics. Generally, indeed, he was prepared to be generous to colleagues whose work he respected without necessarily agreeing with it, and as a student I did not find myself hemmed in by his criticisms, let alone feel neglected or subjected to pet ideas of little

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<sup>3</sup> Respectively *JASO* 13/2 (1982), 139-46; and 'Tetradic theory: an approach to kinship', *JASO* 17/2 (1986), 87-109.

actual relevance, the fates of all too many students. And even after gaining my own doctorate and developing my own academic career, I kept in touch with his interests and was often glad of the opportunity to discuss matters of kinship with him (although interested in the Dumézilian project, I never contributed to it, as I attempted to do with kinship).

Indeed, as an intellectual mentor and source of advice he was hard to beat. He also endured his final illness with commendable stoicism and matter-of-factness, having had reason to anticipate it because of the fates of some of his close relatives. He will be sorely missed by his family, friends, colleagues and former students, myself among them.

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### N.J. Allen, Publications<sup>4</sup>

Abbreviations: *BSOAS* = *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*. *JASO* = *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford*. *JRAI* = *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*. *JRAS* = *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*.

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<sup>4</sup> This list is relatively complete, but there are almost certain to be some gaps. Please report any omissions to [robert.parkin@anthro.ox.ac.uk](mailto:robert.parkin@anthro.ox.ac.uk). Some errors have been corrected in this version. Image and list of publications both reproduced with permission of the School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography, University of Oxford.

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