

Tribute to Hank Nelson

I first met Hank late one Saturday evening in June 1985 at the Canberra railway station. I had come to Canberra to do a PhD at the ANU, in what was then the Department of Pacific and Southeast Asian History. Hank was to be my supervisor. I wonder how we recognised one another in the days before Google Image. Maybe the mechanical typewriter that I was lugging around, gave me away. I knew little about Hank – or about the ANU, Canberra or Australia, for that matter. If somebody had told me that the man to pick me up from the Sydney XPT and deposit me at one of the ANU colleges bore some resemblance to Henry Lawson, I wouldn't have been any wiser.

I can't recall what was said in our first encounter – or rather, I don't know because I do recall being horrified to discover that I couldn't understand Hank with his broad Australian accent. I did understand, however, that I was meant to explore Canberra's city centre the next morning, and that Hank would pick me up in the afternoon to take me for a drive. By the end of that day, I was despondent. Having lived in Europe all my life, Civic (on a Sunday morning in 1985!) wasn't exactly my idea of a city centre. And the fact that Hank took me to see an ugly bunker-like building in Mitchell, a very long way from anywhere, and told me that I would spend some considerable time there, didn't cheer me up either. The next day, I met Hank again at the ANU, and told him that rather than schlepp my typewriter to the

National Archives in Mitchell I needed to do an English language course because I didn't understand him and was daunted by the prospect of having to write in English. That was the only time that Hank flatly refused a request of mine.

I was very tempted to run, to return home while it was still summer. Hank had a lot to do with my decision to stay. He kept the ANU, and his colleagues who expected me to write an archives-based thesis about German New Guinea, off my back and ensured that I could decamp to Sydney and then spend two years in PNG. And I soon discovered that there was an alternative to doing a language course, namely one-on-one tuition from one of the country's finest writers of non-fiction. Hank taught me to think and express myself in English, to reinvent myself and unlearn much of what I knew about writing. He showed me how to be parsimonious with words (a laconic and succinct prose doesn't come naturally to Germans). He taught me to love composing texts in my second language. He also encouraged me to write for audiences other than two or three like-minded scholars, and to experiment with non-academic formats. It was a thrilling learning experience.

My decision to stay had to do also with the kind of person Hank was: patient with his impatient and ignorant student, and gentle and generous – so unlike the stereotypical Australian man and the stereotypical academic, who loomed large in my imagination and were

the subject of endless conversations with other, mostly non-Australian, students.

Hank's generosity was completely unselfish. I was never going to be a disciple (not that Hank had any disciples); initially at least, I wasn't particularly interested in the lives of prisoners of war or in other topics he wrote about, and I didn't produce or procure anything he could have used for his own work. In fact for a long time I had no inclination to venture to Mitchell.

What made Hank such a wonderful teacher was his ability to listen, to provide sound advice in the most casual manner, and to make it possible for us to gradually expand our common ground. That day at the Canberra railway station, I couldn't have imagined that I would write many long letters to Hank while living in Papua New Guinea. When I did, it was because I needed to translate my experiences for somebody far removed from them and because I knew he would read my missives carefully and respond promptly. And speaking of common ground: In 1985, I would have been incredulous if somebody had told me that I would come to love having conversations with Hank about the Australian cricket team!

Hank was a modest man, he wrote about topics that weren't exactly fashionable, and he was working in an environment dominated by men and women with huge egos. As a first-year PhD student I was

often attracted to the fashion of the day and easily dazzled by egos. I was therefore unprepared for the respect, if not awe, with which Hank was regarded by many senior politicians and public servants in Papua New Guinea. Now I consider their regard self-evident; after all, I too have always been proud to have been Hank's student.

Perhaps on account of the two years I spent in a Melanesian village, I am wary of relationships where gifts flow only in one direction. Hank launched my first book, and my second book, and gave a speech at my inaugural lecture in Melbourne. Not to mention all those letters he wrote for me – he was my referee for every single job I applied for in Australia. There was no way I could ever reciprocate his generosity. But throughout those past twenty-seven years, I have always felt comfortable with the debt I owe him.

Hank did share all his writings with me, though – right from when I was a student. 'I don't expect you to read it,' he would say when passing on a paper, but I did anyway – because reading Hank – or listening to his finely crafted talks – has always been a pleasure. I never felt there was an obligation to read whatever my mentor produced.

The student-teacher relationship eventually became a friendship. But Hank was a very private person. (So was I when talking to him.) In 2008, I spent some months in Rome, and out of the blue received a

long email from Hank in which he told me about his cancer. Maybe it was only then that I stopped thinking of him foremostly as ‘my former supervisor’.

Hank was not easily dazzled by men and women with disproportionately large egos. He marvelled at people who were good at something. But for him to speak very highly of somebody, they also needed to be good people. ‘He is a good man,’ would be Hank’s ultimate praise. Another of his former students, August Kituai, wrote to me after he learned of Hank’s death: ‘He was indeed a true friend, exceptionally patient teacher and someone very dependable. I owe him a great deal.’ All that is true for me as well. But most importantly, Hank was a good man.

Klaus Neumann

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