The Rise of McAnthro: Or, Reflections on the History of the Department of Anthropology

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Dick Slobodin's 1975 essay "Anthro at Mac" and the 1976 "Early Friends . . ." carried us from 1881 to 1970, with specifics of the faculty and courses in anthropology, characteristic good humour about the institutional processes, generosity in describing persons and modesty about his own role.

For me, the surprise was not that so little anthro was taught at Mac before the 1960s, but that any was taught at all. Few universities in Canada were teaching anthro at all until this time. In a sequel to Dick's essay, I'm going to reflect on the years that came after the initial loading and lift-off of the Department.

A personal view seems fitting in describing an unusually personable Department from my arrival in 1971 to my writing this little essay in 1999. Dick Slobodin had a great deal to do with my arrival, and I firmly believe that Dick's example set our standard for the collegial "No shoving allowed" ethos that I have enjoyed in my truly privileged career in the Department. I want to say a little about both these points.

I think that it was in 1969, when I was writing my dissertation and teaching at a small college in Pennsylvania, I heard Dick give a paper on Kutchin concepts of reincarnation at a conference in Ottawa. His ethnographic sensitivity and basic humanity deeply impressed me, and I thought that his was the kind of insightful ethnography that I wanted to develop in myself. And with five northernists (Dave Damas, Ruth Landes, Bill Noble, Ed Rogers and Dick Slobodin), McMaster anthro was unique in the entire world, and an ideal place for me.

Maybe it was a year later that I saw my destiny in an ad in the AAA Newsletter. Mac was looking for an ethnologist specializing in any world region, except the north. I saw the ad appear in the Newsletter again, and then a (ritually significant) third time. So I wrote and said that, if they couldn't find who they were looking for, I

sure would like a job in their department. I got a reply from Dick, saying that they "were not all that averse to another northernist," and to send my c.v.

When I came to give a talk and be interviewed, I recall being in a panic because I wanted the job so badly. I went in the wrong doors of KTH, found no elevators, and ran up the steps to arrive at the 7th floor lounge just in time to give my talk, gasping for breath. I read an unfinished (it still is) paper speculating uncertainly on Cree notions of metaphor. I tried to communicate my interest in the topic, noticed that Dave Damas had fallen asleep, took the paper to the point where I had stopped because of unresolved problems, asked for suggestions, and didn't get any takers. Not too auspicious. In desperation, I turned to Dick and blurted that he had suggested that I give an informal presentation. He readily agreed and saved my life by asking me to talk a little about Cree shamanism, which, of course, got the questions going.

I got the job. Dick babysat our kids while his wife Eleanor led us in the search for a house to rent; I finished my dissertation, and was put on the executive committee with Dick and Ed Glanville. At our first meeting Dick asked our permission to eat his bag lunch while we talked. This worked flawlessly until he brought out a huge carrot. We all looked at it and he said, "Too noisy, I guess." We protested that the carrot was OK, too. But he could be persuaded to eat it if only we each shared a chunk. We did. Kind of Indian, eh? Sharing that carrot made me realize that I had, indeed, come to the right place.

He was and still is a sensitive, erudite and helpful Godfather to the Department. I believe that we tended to behave in a collegial way (most of the time) in large part because we didn't want to offend his tangibly felt sense of fairness and dignity. Dick did not need to act in a dominant way to be very influential over others. I, and the rest of us, owe him a great deal. Thanks, Dick.

McAnth after Takeoff: The Preclassic Phase

In 1971, Anth had a full-year, all-subfields introductory course, and I clearly recall my panic when I first walked into the theatre with nearly 400 students enrolled that September, and realized I had to hold their attention until April, covering the Boasian four fields of physical, archaeological, linguistic and cultural anthropology. I invite you to consider how you would feel in this situation, and how you would handle it. I tried to entertain my audience as I made my way through:

1. the Liberating Shift away from Abductive Locomotion (like chimps, eh?) to Extensory Locomotion, demonstrated with dancing my little bump-and-grind drama of The Australopithecine Hip,
2. the revolutionary Head-Levelling Function of the mastoid process, helping us avoid too much staring at the ground or at the stars, illustrated by some head flops,
3. the radically opposable thumb for a Precision Grip in Tool-Making, enabling the incredible time span of type-continuities in stone point-making,
4. the amazing psychological reality of the phoneme, evidenced with the curious ethnographic fact that the Cree language does not differentiate voiced and voiceless bilabial stops, and
5. some shamanism thrown in for the lure of the exotic.

It was an attempt at teaching with entertainment, but I was not exactly Bill Cosby. Most of the students stuck it out, and in the first set of teaching evaluations I recall a fair complaint, "speaks in a monotone," a potential epitaph, "he was good with the overhead projector" and a soul-destroying insult, "lousy bear stories." Sure I spoke in a montone; I was scared. But really, those were great bear stories.

We also had a Year IV full-year course in the history of anthropological theory. Dick taught the early history in the fall term, and I took over "on or about Boas" for the winter term. I enjoyed tracing some themes of 20th century theoretical explorations, but for most people theory is an aquired taste, and history is such sadly distant stuff. I think many of the students found (and still find) the fare an extensive but pretty dry and crumbly smorgasbord.

As far as I can recall, applied anthropology in the Department got its start in 1973. The James Bay Survey was in response to a request from Grand Chief Billy Diamond. On very short notice I found students willing to get away from it all to a couple of weeks' "northern exposure," and with Ed Rogers' help put together a checklist data form. During the middle of the fall term, three grads and two honours undergrads went to four coastal Cree communities to gather information on who shot or trapped what, where and when.

Brian Craik and Kevin Brown went to Waskaganish, where they got some checklists completed and Brian gathered a large amount of very detailed materials on hunting practices; Debbie Hawken went to Wemindji and in about two weeks got married to Walter Hughboy, who was then the band manager (she thereby became legally an Indian, but she didn't do many checklists); and Ed Buller and Rick Cuciurean went to Fort George. Rick also took a good initiative and went to Eastmain for more data. Brian and Rick have worked with or for the Crees ever since, Debbie is a lawyer and still married to Walter,

Kevin went to teachers college and then taught in Native schools in BC until he became an AIDS spokesperson, and Ed went on to be a fieldworker for the Federal Attorney-General's office. The survey was not a great success methodologically, but Harvey Feit tells me it was, nonetheless, useful to the Crees.

A few years later, Milton Freeman's Arctic Land Use Survey was a much more sophisticated and extensive applied project, including detailed mapping work all over the Arctic. It was methodologically very impressive and was nicely published in two volumes by a federal ministry.

About this time, the PhD program planning was underway. We optimistically took in our first PhD students (Jennifer Blythe, David Meyer) and taught our first PhD-oriented courses (700—Contemporary Anth; 722—Method and Theory) before we got the final Provincial approval. By the requirement of the Provincial approvals board, we had to show that it would not be redundant in relation to any existing program. But the only other anthro PhD program in Ontario was at the U of T, which had no discernable focus. This gave us the luxury of free choice. So our program was designed to build on our distinctive strengths, with regional foci on the Canadian North and Oceania, and topical foci on cultural ecology and cultural change.

We thought it a good idea to have a required course for all entering grads in "Contemporary Anthropology," to ensure a comprehensive scope of intellectual sophistication. The goal still sounds quite persuasive to me. Peter Steager and I team-taught this for two years, and we had great fun leaping from mountain peak to mountain peak while holding hands with Claude Levi-Strauss (*The Savage Mind*) and Gregory Bateson (*Naven*; *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*). Other faculty came in to give us an overview of their specialties. The intellectual scope was breathtaking.

Most of the grads were strangely quiet in this rarified milieu, though one or two flourished and a few others nervously told us more than they were sure they knew. Steager and I did not realize that, with all of the grads looking at each other around the same table, the pressure to compete was too strongly felt by some of those grads who were mystified by the nimble explorations of such adroit French and British intellectuals. No one failed the course, but after four years (the second two years were team-taught by Dave Counts and Matt Cooper) the course was deemed a failed experiment. Oh, well.

McAnthro: The Pre-Postmodern Phase 1975-85

This was the year that Rosita Jordan came, organizing the chairman's myriad tasks and keeping them on schedule and responsive to an admiring administration. The Department had reached its maximum undergraduate and graduate student enrolment by this time, with three huge lecture sections of Year I in the day and another section in the evening, a full range of four-field courses in Years II, II and IV, about 15 MA students and about 5 PhD students admitted each year. The undergraduate Anthro Society, based in the archaeology lab, had strong continuity and put on an annual topical symposium. *The Journal of Anth at Mac* (now *NEXUS*) started its successful history of publishing student papers.

We had acquired a very good national reputation, with impressively large numbers of talented people applying to the grad programs, and very high success rates in getting SSHRC and OGS fellowships. And as part of the approval process for the PhD program, Grad Studies established a budget line to ensure that PhD students who did not win external funding for fieldwork would get there anyway. Our first PhDs got good jobs. Some of us thought we had the best Anthro department in Canada. We had six northernists and five Oceanists to give our regional foci a stronger complement than any other university.

This was especially distinctive because the discipline of anthropology was already moving in strong currents of self-doubt and fragmentation. We now label this postmodernism. One British grey eminence commented in print, "What, in heaven's name, are we trying to find out?" One American grey eminence commented in print that his department meetings managed to avoid open conflict by never addressing matters of substance. Anthropologists in Canada, and probably academics in most countries, identified their interests in words that emphasized each individual's uniqueness, avoiding the appearance of overlap with other researchers. Individuation of researchers, rather than a community of scholars, was and is the norm. We were no exception, but we got along pretty well.

Our four field faculty peaked at 16 full-time and 10 part-time persons. But it is hard for faculties to stay in focus over the long haul—even the Mac faculty. We were amused at the follies of our past, and then relieved to drop deep structure for other, less canonical things. We were getting very multivocalic. When I informally asked colleagues what they meant by terms such as "theory" and "method" I found not a Modernist Canon so much as

remarkably little overlap. More graduate students were interested in research closer to home, in a milieu that was less politicized than Melanesia or the Arctic and Subarctic. There were serious doubts raised about the wisdom of continuing our regional foci, and we moved more toward a variety of contemporary topical foci. Perhaps it was our spirit of liberal democracy, or perhaps it was diffidence about the future of our cultural program, but in any event we decided to give over two of our cultural positions to hire faculty to give us three faculty each in physical anthropology and archaeology, so as to include these sub-disciplines in the PhD program.

And then there were the chronic revisions to our PhD comps. We ran into problems trying to agree on how comprehensive we should expect grads to be. Most of the faculty looked back in anguish to their own comps experience, based on "surprise" questions. We aimed for a more collaborative system, where the grad would work out 24 essay topics (covering a fairly comprehensive scope, with references) and consult with her committee, and the faculty would choose some of these topics to actually be written. After the first grad passed through this system, we learned that incredibly, she had drafted all 24 essays in her preparation! We have been scaling down the numbers and the meaning of comprehensive ever since, pressured also by complaints from a series of Graduate Deans that our students take too long to complete their programs. When the PhD was offered also in the subfields of archaeology and physical anthropology, the "comps" became focussed on the intellectual context of each proposed dissertation (while most other Canadian Anthro departments just phased out their comps altogether).

McAnthro: The Post-Classic, Post-affluence, Postmodern Adaptive Radiation, 1985-99

Our shift away from four (two regional; two topical) departmental foci was symptomatic of a general trend in anthro, and perhaps more generally in academe, toward individuation through a remarkably diverse differentiation of topical and regional interests. In the mid-1980s the self-descriptions of the interests of the roughly 600 anthropologists employed in Canadian academe seemed to go to the extreme, collectively listing about 300 topical specialties.

But while faculty and department programs were going into their adaptive radiation, it was not just PhD comps that shrank at Mac and at other universities. Funding cuts became cumulatively severe. Only a little relief came for a few high-employment areas like computers and business, and Mac's planned Arts IV building was changed into a School of Business building. For our Department, new allocations were put on indefinite hold, early retirements were obtained and work loads were increased markedly for the reduced number of faculty.

Remarkably, anthropology enrolment in both undergraduate and graduate programs held up very well. Year II and Year III course sizes went into the hundreds. Government and charitable funding agencies urged a pooling of available resources, including an increase in interdisciplinary and multi-university research and research initiatives with private sector partners. We already had some private sector partners, but they were not industries with funds to share. Applied anthro was already emphasizing problem-based research in political and ethical collaboration with Native organizations.

McAnthro Now: A Prescription

One characteristic that Canadian anthropology as an institution now shares with universities generally, indeed, with service bureaucracies generally, is the stocktaking that this paper contributes to. We are deep into an extended period of the sustained rationalization (read: selective diminishing) of the expenditure rate of public monies, and thereby into the politics of competitive self-justification—how we are doing more with less. The "ripple" effect of federal strategies of restraint began to diffuse to university, faculty and department levels with considerable rapidity in the mid 1970s and is now, 25 years later, a serious impediment to our will and ability to provide high quality education. The cover of the February 15, 1999 *Maclean's Magazine* warns, "The U.N. says Canada is Number 1. But that can't last unless we make radical changes—lower taxes to better education."

Better education in McAnthro can take initiatives in several directions, but I have a prime one that need not wait on more funding and faculty. First and foremost, in my opinion, is a change in the way we encourage the development of writing skills—actually thinking and writing skills. We could change the present practice of any given anthro student writing dozens of undergraduate and graduate essays but almost never carefully rethinking and rewriting a paper until the PhD dissertation writing stage. This excessive repetition of first drafts is stuck at the initial stage of academic writing. Staying at that level is very wasteful of the potential for developing the ability to refine our ideas and to more adroitly contextualize these ideas in the theoretical literature. It would also allow for developing prose style. This would require a change in the curriculum and course

requirements, to make them more cumulative in what students write about, but it is a practical problem with a practical solution.

One of my assessments of the past 25 years is that most of the people who did not complete their PhD in this department got all the way to writing the dissertation and then gave it up. Some significant proportion of these drop-outs did so because the thinking and writing was too daunting a task—they felt that their prose was not professional-sounding enough. For some of these people, I believe it was largely a matter of inadequate training in writing skills. For some others, dropping out may have been a wise decision, since so much of academic careers centre on writing. Those who are truly suited to a career as an academic find a primary personal reward in the disciplined process of research, thinking and writing, and only a secondary reward in the number of interested and potentially influenced readers they can count on. If you want your writings to be widely read, publish a bestseller, or in magazines and newspapers, not in academic journals and books! Some few academics are able to do both. May their numbers increase!