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BERNARD Q. NIETSCHMANN, 1941–2000
REQUIEM FOR A FRIEND

W. GEORGE LOVELL

When word reached me of Barney Nietschmann's death—he succumbed to esophageal cancer at the age of fifty-eight—I was back home in Glasgow, Scotland, dealing there with a family crisis of a similarly somber nature. Barney's death only deepened the sense of loss I felt, for it followed that of two other scholars at the University of California, Berkeley, whose work I admired and whose friendship I cherished, Woodrow W. Borah (1912–1999) and James J. Parsons (1915–1997). Borah and Parsons, as did my mother, reached and then surpassed the biblical span of three score years and ten. Barney, however, fell short of that mark, taken from us in his alert and fruitful prime, with much more to do and with much more to give (Figure 1). If I regard Barney's death as untimely, others must do so even more. Who in attendance at the June 2001 meeting of the Conference of Latin Americanist Geographers, when Barney was honored posthumously with the Preston E. James Eminent Latin Americanist Career Award, will forget how his young daughter, Tangni, whose name in Miskito translates as "Flower," accepted the recognition on her father's behalf. At Benicassim in Spain that evening, the stately palm trees lining the Mediterranean stood on surrogate guard for those of Barney's beloved "Caribbean Edge." As Tangni's choked words mingled with the sound of the sea it was impossible not to think about how much Barney would have appreciated the setting, how much the notion of celebrating his achievements beside a beautiful shore would have pleased him.

How can I forget the energy, indeed the drama, of the circumstances of our first encounter? As Barney would approve, the historical geographer in me must furnish the necessary coordinates: the time, October 1983; the place, a lecture theater in the Graduate School of Journalism, a stone's throw from the Earth Sciences Building (it will never be McCone Hall for me) on the northern edge of the Berkeley campus. Amid a packed audience I sat next to Jim Parsons, listening to Barney lament what he considered the misguided, heavy-handed, culturally insensitive, and morally unacceptable manner in which the Sandinista government in Nicaragua was treating its Miskito Indian communities. I did not know Barney personally at the time, but I admired his courage and his clarity in speaking out. I said as much to Jim Parsons.

"They're not going to like it," Jim responded.

How right he was. Much of what Barney had to say that afternoon, and subsequently, did not go over well with certain factions of those in attendance. Some ill-tempered, downright nasty allegations were hurled at him. To some of Barney's critics, coming in the wake of the U.S. invasion of Grenada, the timing of his disclo-

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tures was unfortunate, to say the least. For Barney, however, it was simply unavoidable if the Miskito plight were to be brought to the attention of the international community and support given to their struggle to live a dignified life on their own terms. His principled stand on the Miskito situation, I was to learn later, was part of a larger commitment Barney had made to champion the rights of native peoples elsewhere in the Americas and in far-flung regions throughout the world.

It was during fall term of 1985, while at Berkeley as a visiting scholar, that I came to know Barney at a personal level and find out firsthand what made him tick as a professor. I sat in on one of his undergraduate courses, a sprawling, idiosyncratic analysis of land and life in what Barney called "The Fourth World." I still have his coursebook, "The Other Side of the Frontier," a thick dossier of thought-provoking pieces on indigenous movements drawn from all sorts of literary genres. I held on to that coursebook because, above all else, it allows us a kaleidoscopic peek inside Barney's teeming head and affords us a revealing glimpse of a nimble mind that could make all sorts of connections through time and across space from a diverse, at times giddy, body of literature. Barney relished being at the cutting edge. Indeed, much of what he had to say about the often explosive relationship between ethnicity and nationalism prefigured its now fashionable discussion by more than a decade.

One morning in class he sprang a typically Nietschmann trick on me. No sooner had we all settled down when Barney cleared his throat and announced, "Well folks, today I'm gonna rest and let someone else do the talking. Doesn't happen often. George, come up here, please, and tell us about what's going on with Maya peoples in Guatemala. Thanks."

Advance warning? None. Preparation time? Zilch. "Hey!" he justified over coffee afterward, "They got you fresh. They got you thinking on your feet. That's good!" His eyes shone approvingly into mine. It was pure Barney. Acts of spontaneity, geared at getting to the heart of the matter and forcing us to think about the basics, are what he reveled in. He was master of the skillful art of being casual and at ease, offhand but never off guard, when stirring things up.

And quite a stir he caused when our paths crossed in April 1990 at the Association of American Geographers meetings in Toronto. It was late on Saturday evening.

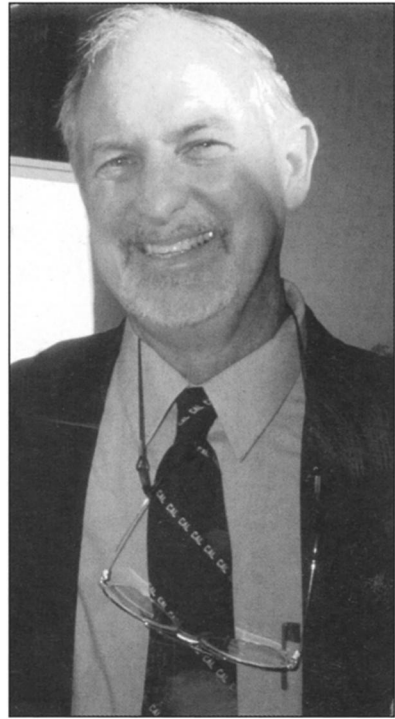


FIG. 1—Barney Nietschmann on his home ground, outside the Berkeley Faculty Club, fall 1997. (Photograph by William Davidson)

Since the start of the conference early on Thursday morning no one had sighted Barney, listed as a paper presenter in the conference program and scheduled to speak on Sunday morning.

“He’s off somewhere in the South Pacific or Northern Australia,” one person said.

“No,” responded another. “That was last week. He’s down in Costa Rica at the moment.”

I almost collided with Barney as he stormed into the conference hotel, straight from the airport.

“Hey!” he declared. “Where we going?” It was as if our chance meeting had been arranged months in advance, not something that came about because I happened to be heading out the door as Barney was heading in.

“A night to remember”—the phrase does not even hint at the intensity, the hilarity, the sheer joy of being with Barney during the hours that followed. First we checked him into a nearby hotel. Then we caught up on each other’s news in a sushi bar. Next we took in a set at a jazz joint. Then we headed to an after-hours venue that a friend of mine had recommended, where the music of the featured band might best be described as New World Celtic Punk. The band’s name was Rare Air. Barney loved them. Guitars, synthesizers, saxophones, an array of percussion, and . . . bagpipes! We had a ball. At one juncture in our merrymaking two young women approached us and inquired, “Aren’t you guys kinda old to be enjoying this kinda stuff?” Barney roared with laughter, that raucous voice of his replying firmly in the negative. I can hear him hooting still.

After the music and dancing ended, as the band was packing up, Barney went over to the bagpiper and handed him his business card. “If you ever get out to the Bay Area,” he volunteered, “be sure to look me up.” Again, pure Barney.

Outside the night club on Bloor Street a group of environmentalists reminded us—as if Barney needed reminding—that we were now in the wee small hours of Earth Day.

“What would you like us to do, my friend?” Barney asked one activist, who was mixing up a bucket of whitewash.

“Leave your mark on the pavement,” he replied.

Barney dipped both hands into the bucket and left elegant imprints not only on the sidewalk but also on an alley wall next to the night club. Although the sidewalk traces of him soon were erased, for months thereafter I would stroll by and smile at Barney’s handprints on the alley wall.

I was exhausted, but Barney was up for coffee and dessert. We found a café and talked some more. Finally, at 5:00 or so in the morning, we headed back to his hotel, where I crashed for what was left of the night.

At 8:00 we continued our conversation over breakfast, me decidedly cobwebby, Barney focused on his 9:30 presentation, which drew a good crowd and, as ever,

sparked an animated debate. He flew back to California in the afternoon, his whirlwind visit lasting less than twenty-four hours. I drove back to Kingston and slept.

Like the band we heard in Toronto together twelve years ago, Barney Nietschmann was a breath not merely of fresh but of rare air, a marvelous blast of life-affirming essence. He left his mark on more than just that Bloor Street sidewalk and that nightclub alley wall. Though he will be sorely missed, never will he be forgotten.