

George Brooks talk at McCall Memorial, Saturday, October 3, 2009

We meet today because of Pat Morgan's initiative. Pat is truly amazing! We all greatly admire her smarts, grit, and determination to celebrate Dan's life and achievements.

Dan McCall had a remarkable life, one that began disastrously as a truant and incorrigible youth, and ended as a distinguished scholar and a mentor to his students, his students' students, and innumerable others who sought his counsel.

While a Navy medic during WWII, Dan landed alongside Marines during the horrendously bloody invasions of Pacific islands. He mentioned this to me for the first time in August 1996 – after I had known him 39 years. Then, and subsequently, Dan never described these experiences. Awaiting discharge in Hawaii, Dan impulsively shouldered his way through a column of naval officers, risking incarceration in the brig and a bad conduct discharge, which might have made him ineligible for the G.I. Bill. My earliest recollection of Dan was soon after arriving at Boston University in 1957, finding him – my Professor! – seated cross-legged on the floor of the Mugar Library pulling books off shelves and researching some topic that had attracted his interest.

I was not a promising graduate student. While I was delivering my first seminar paper – something about Uganda derived from my senior thesis at Dartmouth – Dan went to sleep. In desperation, I looked to Norman Bennett; already a friend and role model, and Norm silently indicated that I should keep droning-on. After awhile Dan roused and nothing was said.

Subsequently, I assessed my circumstances: Norman Bennett was specializing on East Africa with an interest in North Africa. Laurence Solomon was concentrating on South and Southern Africa. All that was left for me was West Africa. The research projects of the following age-grades of History students supervised by Dan and Norman Bennett were less delusional and were generally country-specific.

Dan never lectured from notes, passed-out maps, or showed slides. He would enter the classroom, pause to collect his thoughts, then deliver a seamless lecture on whatever interested him that day. Dan ranged across topics and disciplines. One day, someone asked a question that involved a four-letter word. Dan obligingly wrote the word on the board

and explained its meaning and derivation, followed by a number of other four-letter words, explaining the origins of each one, whether from Old Norse, Greek, Latin, or whatever. Students dutifully took notes. President Harold Case was informed, and informed Dan. Sometime before, or after, Dan became enraged by parking and salary issues, and barged into Dean O'Donald's office and addressed him in salty language. Fortunately, the director of the B.U. African Studies Program, Dr. William O. Brown, recognized the worth of this mutinous ex-seaman.

Dan had a great sense of humor. Also, he was unpredictable. One summer Dan was trying to catch-up on his many projects and initiated an 8-hour work schedule interspersed by 4 hours of sleep -- which regime lasted perhaps a week or two. Over the years, Dan sought to supplement his income by writing novels, historical and otherwise -- I think at least four, none of which was accepted by a press for publication.

Among scholars across disciplines, Dan was renowned to his path-breaking -- indeed intrepid -- book entitled 'Africa in Time-Perspective: A Discussion of Historical Reconstruction from Unwritten Sources' (1964/1969). Dan's interests ranged world-wide. Consider that Dan might have concentrated his professional life on Ghana where he did his dissertation research. After publishing a monograph on his research at Koforidua, he might have churned-out "Return to Koforidua," "Son of Koforidua," "Daughter of Koforidua," and so on. Instead, consider some of the topics Dan wrote about: "The Horse in West African History"; "Wolf Courts Girl: The Equivalence of Hunting and Mating in Bushman Thought"; "The Marvelous Chicken"; "Towards a History of West African Dress"; "The Afroasiatic Language Phylum and African Prehistory"; "Neolithic Pig Culture"; "Goliath's Kinsmen"; "Herodotus and the Garamantes: A Problem in Protohistory"; "The Vocabulary of Charioty in Bronze Age China"; and he started a biography of the anthropologist Lewis H. Morgan (1818-1883), reputed the "Father of American Anthropology" -- besides which Dan wrote numerous book reviews covering an amazing range of subjects.

Norman Bennett was hired by the Boston University History Department, so I and other African History graduate students had "to go for bush," for me Indiana University. In correspondence and during sporadic encounters Dan encouraged me concerning a wide range of projects. In what I now reflect were my "kamakazi" years, I published papers on

West Africa's climate history, Mande migrations, a comparison of religious beliefs in Portugal and Guinea-Bissau, chimpanzee tool-use, and other topics that interested few historians, most notably senior colleagues who monitored my scholarship and teaching regarding salary and promotions. No matter, Dan kept cheering me on!

Dan traveled widely – – just considering retirement years, he and Pat far outdistanced their Viking and Greek forbears. Wherever he went – – Africa, western Europe, Mediterranean countries, Pacific Islands, wherever – – Dan immersed himself learning about an area's archaeology, anthropology, and history, sought-out leading scholars, and began writing research papers, monographs, and novels. In recent years, I telephoned Dan more and more frequently, exploiting the advantages of cell-phones handed-down by our daughters. During his final illness, Dan kept assuring me that he was convalescing, regardless that Pat informed me otherwise. During telephone conversations Dan's voice was strong, as was his intellect, as was his fabulous memory – – Dan was "Total Recall McCall" to the end of his life!

George E. Brooks