FACULTY OBITUARIES

Daniel McCall, anthropologist, intrepid traveler, and mentor

Sharp memory earned him the nickname “Total Recall McCall”

By Katie Koch

A voracious reader with broad scholarly interests and a steel-trap memory, Daniel F. McCall helped create the anthropology department and build the African Studies Center into a cutting-edge interdisciplinary program in three decades at Boston University.

McCall (CAS’49), a College of Arts & Sciences professor emeritus of anthropology, died on July 10, 2009. He was ninety-one.

After a tough Depression-era childhood and a stint in the U.S. Coast Guard during World War II, McCall earned his degree from BU on the G.I. Bill. He later enrolled in a doctoral program at Columbia University, taking time off for fieldwork in Ghana and Liberia.

He returned to BU in 1954, while still completing his Ph.D., as the first faculty member hired for the newly created African Studies Center, then called the African Research and Studies Program.

At a time when few Africa scholars performed fieldwork, McCall’s reputation as an intrepid traveler spread beyond BU. Robert Levine, a Harvard graduate student in anthropology in the 1950s, came to work with McCall after discovering no one in his home department had been to the then-mysterious continent.

“It wasn’t just that Dan was the only person I knew who had ever been to Africa,” Levine wrote in a tribute to McCall. “He was willing to serve as a mentor and model to budding Africanists like me.”

McCall’s teaching style earned him fans as well, said George E. Brooks, his former student and a professor emeritus of history at Indiana University.

He never lectured from notes or slides, instead relying on his famous memory and “great sense of humor.”

“He would enter the classroom, pause to collect his thoughts, then deliver a seamless lecture on whatever interested him that day,” said Brooks (GRS’58,’62). His memory, Brooks said, earned him the nickname “Total Recall McCall.”

McCall’s memory, and his love of poetry, helped him endure a difficult night during boot camp. In a video for the Favorite Poem Project, founded by Robert Pinsky, the three-time U.S. poet laureate and a professor in the Graduate School of Arts & Sciences Creative Writing Program, McCall said he was ordered to patrol a wharf for four hours on a bitter winter night. “I started reciting poetry,” he said, “and I started with Shakespeare’s twenty-ninth sonnet. By the time I got through all of the poems I tried to remember, I was being relieved.”

McCall’s most renowned work, Africa in Time-Perspective: A Discussion of Historical Reconstruction from Unwritten Sources (1964), was a path-breaking amalgam of history and anthropology, according to Robert Weller, a CAS professor and chair of anthropology.

“The book transformed the way we looked at Africa by drawing on his polymath strengths as an anthropologist who was equally comfortable in archaeology, ethnology, and historical linguistics,” Weller said in a recent tribute to McCall.

McCall retired in 1983, but remained active in his research and in the community. He cofounded the Association for the Study of Language in Prehistory with Hal Fleming, a CAS professor emeritus of anthropology. He spent much of his last years writing a memoir, One Thing Leads to Another … : The Turbulent Youth of Dan McCall, which was published just after his death.

“During telephone conversations Dan’s voice was strong, as was his intellect, as was his fabulous memory,” Brooks said. “Dan was ‘Total Recall McCall’ to the end of his life.”