

N.J. Allen, 1939–2020

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Beneath his shy and donnish exterior N.J. – or Nick, as he was universally known to friends and colleagues – Allen was a man of determination, self-belief, and bravery. “Like a rock climber, a comparativist must take some risks,” he wrote (Allen 2003: 283n10). Nick knew what he was talking about, both about the rock climbing and about comparison. He had a lifelong love of mountains, which he had inherited from his mother; both she and he had done serious climbing in the Alps. She also brought him up with the expectation of fluency in foreign languages. By contrast, Nick ascribed his love of research to the example of his father, a Celtic numismatist (Allen 2003: 271). Nick was a serious, hardworking, deeply learned, and committed scholar, a polymath who acquired Latin, Greek, French, German, Italian, and Spanish at school (Rugby); later he learned Russian. Then there were the languages he learned for fieldwork: Nepali, Thulung Rai, Hindi. Until quite late in life he went on learning new languages (Sanskrit, Pali, Tibetan, Old Norse, Old Irish) to help him in his research.

From school he won a scholarship to read Classics at New College, Oxford; but he decided to switch to medicine. It is somewhat ironic that late in life he ended up spending so much time on Greek and Latin literature, but it is simultaneously a tribute to his school education that he was able to do so with such ease. Switching into a science subject at university was surprisingly easy in the 1950s. After a couple of terms he had, apparently, caught up with his peers who had studied science at school. By his fourth year he knew that he found studying medicine unexciting and even medical research (a year spent doing neurophysiology) uninspiring; the realization dawned that medicine was not for him. Nonetheless, he was persuaded that it would be better to complete his medical training and qualify as a doctor. Meanwhile, he took time off to climb and travel. His mother’s brother, the father of the anthropologist Alfie Gell, had some anthropology books and it was at his house that Nick stumbled across Haddon’s *History of Anthropology*. This gave Nick the idea of returning to Oxford to do the Diploma (now the MSc) in Social Anthropology in 1963–4.

This time round he found Oxford intellectually exciting, the vistas opened up by anthropology contrasting sharply with the lack of ideas in his medical training. He was strongly influenced by his supervisor Rodney Needham, who was in his high structuralist period. Needham had been in the Gurkhas during the war, and so, when Nick said he was thinking of doing fieldwork in the Himalayas, he encouraged him to go to Nepal (Onta 2004: 31). While doing his BLitt in Oxford, Nick learned Nepali at SOAS alongside Lionel and Pat Caplan and Alan Macfarlane. This led to PhD fieldwork in Nepal, partially supervised by Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, who helped to get him a grant as part of a large Social Science Research Council project on social change. Nick argued to himself that it was essential to understand the traditional ‘baseline’ in order to say anything about social change, and then worked principally on the oral literature and myths of the Thulung Rai. At Tribhuvan University in Kathmandu he was one of the first foreign scholars to be affiliated with what was then called INAS and is now CNAS, the Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies. Having had no training in linguistics, he tried teaching himself with little success, until he met Austen Hale of the Summer Institute of Linguistics during a trip back to Kathmandu just over half way through his fieldwork. On his return to the UK, he fulfilled his duties to the SSRC with a substantial section on ‘Social and Economic Change among the Thulung Rai’ as part of the project report.

The Rai are divided into numerous subgroups, each with their own mutually unintelligible language. Nick's first publication (1975) was a grammar of Thulung Rai published by the Cornell University China-Japan programme. That his historical interests were already strong is demonstrated by the fact that he had chosen the Thulung, of all the myriad Rai groups, because he had read that theirs was the most archaic branch of east Himalayish within the Tibeto-Burman language family (Allen 2000b: 257n6; Onta 2004: 32). His DPhil on the mythology of the Thulung was published many years later by Vajra Books in Kathmandu as *Miyapma: Traditional Narratives of the Thulung Rai* (Allen 2012). The book records meticulously the names of all Nick's interlocutors and assistants in the field and their different contributions. Originally he had planned to revise and expand the thesis. But eventually, he realized:

... my notion of revision had been incoherent. What I was doing in practice was expanding the geographical and historical range of material used for comparison with the Thulung narratives—but such expansion had no logical limit... I recalled Casaubon's failure to complete his *Key to all mythologies* in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*. I had to choose between publishing the thesis more or less as it stood and not publishing it. (Allen 2012: xvii–xviii)

Nick wrote at least nine articles on Thulung ritual, shamanism, and social change, several of which drew on the material from the thesis. Together with the influential papers on fourfold classifications in Tibetan societies, they would make a substantial and worthwhile companion volume to *Miyapma* focusing on Himalayan kinship, culture, and language. Nick himself always had more pressing research to pursue and so never did collect them for publication.

Nick taught for four years, 1972 to 1976, at the University of Durham. He then returned to Oxford as University Lecturer in the Anthropology of South Asia, the position formerly occupied by M.N. Srinivas, Louis Dumont, David Pocock, and Ravi Jain. Relations between other members of the department and Nick's old supervisor, Needham, were difficult and became particularly stressful shortly after Nick's arrival when Needham was appointed to the professorship held formerly by Evans-Pritchard and Maurice Freedman. Those tensions were resolved about a year later when Needham exiled himself to All Souls and the rest of the department were left to circulate the chairmanship of the management committee amongst themselves.

As well as teaching the whole range of social anthropology to MSc students in weekly tutorials, Nick was responsible for the option course on South Asia, with a focus on Hinduism. This he taught with Dumont's *Homo Hierarchicus* as the key text, each week focusing on a different chapter, with other readings brought in to expand the range. It was almost like holy text and commentary. This approach had the great virtue of imparting a deep knowledge of Dumont's theory to those who took the course; many South Asianists today (who have reacted strongly against the domination that Dumont once held in their field) would regard that as a singular *disadvantage*.

Rodney Needham, with his wide knowledge of intellectual history, had sown a crucial seed by introducing Nick to the work of Georges Dumézil in 1965. When Nick began his work on Thulung myth he was drawn to Dumézil, as opposed to the much more fashionable Lévi-Strauss, because of Dumézil's historical framework. While he was still in Durham, he had tried to apply a Dumézilian approach to Tibeto-Burman comparative mythology. Now, in Oxford, and focused on Hinduism, a whole new field of Indo-European comparativism began to open up, with links and connections that Dumézil himself had not explored. At the same time, taking an Indo-European comparativist approach could reveal deep structures and connections of which most South Asianists were completely unaware. While an admirer of Dumont's method and range, he was not particularly

interested in Dumont's focus on caste. He once remarked to me how odd it was that *Homo Hierarchicus*, while certainly about Hinduism in one sense, had no discussion at all of the gods of Hinduism.

The article was Nick's natural medium and he wrote over 70; all his books, except the thesis, were collections of articles. The ethnographic monograph, at which Evans-Pritchard had been so brilliant, was not Nick's medium. Comparing himself to EP (and perhaps unfairly implying that EP was 'just' an ethnographer), he remarked, "[Unlike EP] I am not a brilliant descriptive ethnographer" (Macfarlane 2012: 27'24"). Of his time teaching at Durham, he recalled, "I was already seeing myself less as a descriptive ethnographer than as a Tibeto-Burman cultural comparativist, and as a teacher I enjoyed initiating a course on Anthropology and Language" (Allen 2003: 277).

In his later career Nick made significant contributions to three main areas: kinship theory, the history of anthropology (specifically the *Année Sociologique* school, particularly on Mauss as well as Durkheim and Dumont), and comparative Indo-European mythology. To those three areas should be added contributions earlier in his career: the ethnography of east Nepal, specifically on the Thulung Rai; and comparative Himalayan (mainly Tibetan) myth, kinship, and social structures. The paper he contributed to *Anthropologists in a Wider World* (Allen 2000b) is a passionate defence of his decision, after coming to Oxford in 1976, to focus his efforts on desk research and to leave time-consuming ethnography to others. He saw this as a valid and necessary step to developing the world-historical comparisons in which he was interested. He closed the essay with a ringing plea for an expansive and tolerant view of the discipline: "... we need to keep open a place for such non-fieldworkers, making it clear to students and wider public alike that the discipline can accommodate not only the emulators of Malinowski, but also those whose interests, background and aptitudes direct them rather towards Mauss" (Allen 2000b: 256).

In fact, Nick did do one more period of fieldwork in Kinnaur, Himachal Pradesh, in 1981 (he had hoped to go to Assam, but the local politics and difficulties in obtaining permission made that impossible). The period in Kinnaur was personally pleasant, but the local culture was too far removed from the Tibetan culture area to be relatable to his earlier work on Tibeto-Burman comparativism and, in any case, his own interests had moved on; he also felt that he had spent too little time there for the material gathered to be worth publishing.

Nick's reflections on Marcel Mauss, honed over years of reading and teaching the French school, are collected in *Categories and Classifications* (2000a). Neophyte anthropologists are routinely set Mauss's essays on the gift and the person, as well as the long essay on primitive classification co-authored with his uncle Émile Durkheim. The interpretation of these essays is not straightforward and anthropologists are very far from agreed on what to take from them. On one level Nick's collected essays on Mauss can be read, and are very helpful, as a synthetic guide to the great French anthropologist's writings. Yet, at the same time, the book forms a bridge to what became Nick's greatest love, comparative Indo-European mythology and ideology.

The kinship work was prefigured in two early articles, 'A Dance of Relatives' and 'Tetradic Theory: An Approach to Kinship' (Allen 1982, 1986), both published in *JASO* (the *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford*). They distilled the lessons of quadripartite kin systems into a simple model of four kinds of relative. They ended with the speculation that, as the simplest possible kinship terminology and structure, it had emerged initially out of tribal celebrations and was then used to organize society into totemic clans. This idea has subsequently been cited and developed by other scholars as a serious attempt to build on the insights of Durkheim, Mauss, Lévi-Strauss, et al., to provide a coherent model of the earliest human society, one that avoids the simplistic projection of

contemporary Western common sense onto the distant past (James 2003: 84–5, 159–60; Barnard 2003; Allen et al. 2011).

Perhaps the intellectual contribution closest to Nick's heart was his pursuit of the comparisons to be found between the *Mahabharata* and Homer's *Odyssey*. Inspired by Dumézil's work on the Hindu epic, Nick believed he had been able to go much further than the great master. The parallels between the two epics were so numerous and so precise that "there is little room for doubt. The only reasonable explanation is that the two epics go back to a common origin from which they diverged in the course of separate oral transmission" (Allen 2000b: 254–5). Nick's crucial theoretical advance was to supplement Dumézil's three functions (religious and magical power; physical force and war; fertility and prosperity) with a fourth sacred pole (focusing on the outside, the other, and the uncanny), with both a positive and negative valence. This meant that, depending on context, the key organizing number for underlying structures could be either four or five.

In 2017 the Radhakrishnan Memorial Fund committee made a small grant to Nick to assist in the editing, by Felix Padel, of a collection of twenty-four of his most important essays on this theme (some had been published in obscure places; three were previously available only in French, one only in Italian). The collection of essays, *Arjuna–Odysseus: Shared Heritage in Indian and Greek Epic* (Allen 2020), was launched in the School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography on 6 December 2019 among friends, family, and students.

In other, more self-advertising, academic hands, Nick's discovery of such detailed correspondences in geographically widely dispersed parts of the Indo-European world would have been trumpeted from the roof-tops, condensed into a major breakthrough article in *Nature* or *New Scientist*. A comparativist framework, Nick believed, enabled one to see that "again and again, independent invention has been given the credit that in fact belongs to common origin" (Allen 2003: 280). One of the perhaps most surprising parts of this comparative enterprise was Nick's discovery that not only Buddhist cosmology, but even the stories about the Buddha's life, reveal patterns similar to those of ancient epic heroes (Allen 2003: 281). Even the axial-age breakthrough figure of the Buddha cannot escape his Indo-European heritage.

One of Nick's great attributes was his complete indifference to academic fashion. Most of his South Asianist colleagues (as one very distinguished such colleague once confided to me) regarded Nick's Dumézilian researches as more or less barking mad; but Nick didn't care. Another example would be the review he wrote for *American Anthropologist* of Sherry Ortner's *High Religion: A Cultural and Political History of Sherpa Buddhism* (1989). Ortner's monograph was written both to argue for and to exemplify the virtues of practice theory and was widely admired as such at the time. Although Ortner's brilliant career was already launched, Nick was not impressed: "Would one undertake a cultural and political history of Catholicism in rural Mexico without reading Spanish?" he asked, since Ortner had not consulted Tibetan sources or compared her findings to other parts of the culturally Tibetan world. Nick's conclusion was damning: "In the final analysis one cannot make bricks without straw, and much of the 'history' offered us is merely speculation founded on negative evidence or politico-economic supposition" (Allen 1992: 968). Ortner (1993) wrote a furious response to the journal, accusing Nick of "textology"; Nick, never a controversialist, did not reply.

Of a piece with his utter commitment to his academic interests, regardless of fashion, was Nick's indifference to honours, even of the otherworldly sort pursued by academics. He did not seek recognition from others and, unlike some of his Oxford colleagues, he made no attempt to turn his students into disciples. He was happy that a few dedicated Dumézilians around the world shared his interests, even if they had not (yet) accepted his reinterpretation of the Dumézilian triad. He

supervised a large number of doctorates on diverse subjects far from his own research interests (e.g. returnee schoolchildren or diving women in Japan). He remained interested in what his ex-students were doing and would listen with amused detachment to tales from the anthropological mainstream.

Nick was devoted to his wife Sheila, whom he met at Linacre College during his Diploma year. She came to join him in his Thulung fieldwork for six weeks after a period doing VSO (voluntary service overseas) in Pakistan. He was devoted also to his two daughters, Charlotte and Martha, and to the four grandchildren who came along in due course.

Nick always appeared to me as a walking and cycling advertisement for early retirement. He explained that the very happy year he and Sheila spent in India (half in Shantiniketan, half in Pune) immediately after retirement was deliberately designed to mark a caesura, to show that he was not around and that he was no longer available for all the minor, time-consuming duties of academia. As an illustration of his attitude to those minor irritations of academia, I relate one legendary conversation with the then head of department, who looked in at Nick's office to ask: "Nick, could we have a word about the RAE?" Nick replied, "Sure. What's 'RAE'?"

Nick himself wrote that he saw early retirement "less in terms of stepping 'down' than of stepping up – into an indefinite sabbatical" (Allen 2003: 281). He often appeared in Wolfson College for lunch and worked in a small office in the basement of the department in the afternoons. He took advantage of the riches that Oxford has to offer, often going to classicist, philological, and even occasionally social anthropology seminars. He donated his photographs, notes, and audio recordings to the Pitt Rivers Museum (see link below for the recordings). Despite the cancer that he had to battle with in his final years, he kept working cheerfully until the end.

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Photo 1 caption: The ethnographer and others photographed by the shaman (*dhami*), Dan Bahadur Rai, in front of the latter's house, 5 February 1970. Reproduced with permission, (c) Pitt Rivers Museum. 2008.115.158.

Photo 2 caption: Nick Allen in Oxford, 2018. Photo courtesy of VOX, Voices from Oxford.