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in memory of John Barnes

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JOHN ARUNDEL BARNES (1918 – 2010)¹

MICHAEL YOUNG

Humping my drum, modestly subtitled 'a memoir' in lowercase, which John Barnes wrote towards the end of his long and well-travelled life, is an engaging ramble up and down the years, from his birth in Reading, Berkshire, to his encroaching blindness in 2007 in a Cambridgeshire village. The book was written with 'the general reader' in mind rather than professional colleagues. Six of its twenty four chapters are devoted to John's war service, three or four to his fieldwork, and none at all to his writings. The title is cribbed from a ballad by G. Seal: 'I've humped my drum from Kingdom Come / To the back of the Milky Way,' which suggests how John saw himself: as a traveller, a gypsy-scholar perhaps, who, according to the back cover, 'was never happier than when he was on a journey'. The memoir was written as Parkinson's disease, diagnosed in 1997, increasingly disabled him.²

During the course of a chameleon academic career, J.A. Barnes (as he usually signed himself) occupied two of the most important chairs of anthropology in Australia and the first chair of sociology at Cambridge. He also held research or teaching positions at the Rhodes Livingstone Institute, Oxford University, the London School of Economics, University College London, and Manchester University. He conducted fieldwork in East Africa, principally among the Fort Jameson Ngoni of Northern Rhodesia (Zambia), and in western Norway in a fishing and farming community. His theoretical contributions were to fields as diverse as kinship and social organisation, political and legal anthropology, network analysis, the sociology of knowledge, historical demography, colonialism and post-colonialism, and the study of professional ethics. His publications (seven books and a couple of hundred chapters and articles) span six decades. Among his academic distinctions were the Wellcome Medal (1950) and the Rivers Memorial

¹ This obituary first appeared in *The Australian Anthropological Society Newsletter*, December 2010. It is reprinted here with permission of the AAS Executive.

² Barnes, 2007. Unless otherwise sourced, quotations in what follows are taken from this work.

Medal (1959); he was a Fellow of Churchill College, Cambridge, and an Honorary Life Member of the Australian Anthropology Society.

The son of a piano-tuner, John Barnes was born in Reading, Berkshire, into what he called 'a lower middle class kin network'. He won a scholarship to Christ's Hospital (a public school founded by Edward VI in 1552), and went up to Cambridge on a St John's College scholarship to do the Mathematics Tripos, taking courses in anthropology during his final year and graduating with a B.A. in 1939. He joked about his choice of anthropology as an option: it was advertised as explaining the meaning of civilisation and the origin of culture; he thought he would like to find out about that, 'but I never did' (Hiatt 1996: 4–15).

Despite the mediocre teaching he received at Cambridge – only Jack Driberg engaged him – John fancied becoming an anthropologist. Meyer Fortes, then at Oxford, warned him that unless he had a private income he had better give up the idea. The war deferred any decision. It broke out as John was visiting Lapland, and on his return to England he joined the Fleet Air Arm of the Royal Navy. He trained as a navigator and sailed as far as Hawaii and New Caledonia. He survived several air crashes (which were due to poor maintenance rather than to enemy action), and was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross – for no better reason, he surmised, than it being the King's birthday. The last two years of the war he spent first at Farnborough and then at the Admiralty in London. To escape the Navy as quickly as possible, he responded to a *New Statesman* advertisement for a research position with the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute and in early 1946 he joined Max Gluckman and Clyde Mitchell for a crash-course in fieldwork. Accompanied by his wife Frances (whom he had married in 1942) John spent the best part of the next two years doing fieldwork among the Ngoni, whose politically dynamic expansion he characterised as a 'snowball state'. Two books resulted from this research: *Marriage in a changing society* (1951) and *Politics in a changing society: a political history of the Fort Jameson Ngoni* (1954).

Barnes belonged to that post-war generation of anthropologists who consolidated research begun in colonial British Africa by the students of Radcliffe Brown at Cape Town and Malinowski at the L.S.E. This cohort of Africanists (variously influenced by Evans-Pritchard, Meyer Fortes and Max Gluckman) included Elizabeth Colson, Mary Douglas, Bill Epstein, Jack Goody, Godfrey Lienhardt, Max Marwick, John Middleton, Clyde Mitchell, M.G. Smith and Victor Turner. The only members of the cohort to survive John Barnes are Elizabeth Colson and his sometime Cambridge colleague, Sir Jack Goody.

On his return from Africa in 1949, John took up a lectureship at University College, London, which Daryll Forde had earmarked for him. By the end of 1951 John had been awarded an Oxford D.Phil in social anthropology, and he held simultaneously a Simon Fellowship at Manchester University, a college Fellowship at St John's, Cambridge, and an honorary research assistantship at U.C.L. 'I had three jobs', he told Les Hiatt later, 'so I went off to Norway' (ibid: 10). This move was partly to please Max Gluckman, who wanted to introduce sociology into his new anthropology department at Manchester. John did fourteen months' fieldwork in Bremnes, where he studied kinship and class, fishing and land tenure, and parish pump politics. Gluckman had miscalculated and there was no job in the offing when John returned to Manchester with his growing family. In 1954 he applied for a lectureship in Cambridge but was beaten to it by Edmund Leach, whose readership at the L.S.E. was thereby fortuitously vacated for John Barnes to fill.

Two years later John was restless again, and there being no professorships on the horizon in Britain he was tempted to try for Sydney, although he admitted later that as an Africanist he was 'ill-prepared for working as an anthropologist in Australia' (Barnes 2001: 141). Rather to his surprise he got the job, and the Barnes family duly sailed for the antipodes. In Melbourne he was greeted by the refugee German ethnologist, Leonard Adam, who exclaimed: 'The day of liberation has arrived!' He was referring to the end of Elkin's long and tenacious tenancy of the Sydney Chair. Barnes soon discovered, however, that Elkin did not subscribe to the official view of retirement. For a month he shared a small desk with the new incumbent the better to 'advise' him. Elkin also contrived to keep the editorship of *Oceania* for the next twenty years. A joke that John relished was Editor Elkin's choice of A.P. Elkin to review a new edition of his own book, *Understanding Australian Aborigines*. Unsurprisingly, the review was favourable.

In 1956 state-funded Australian universities were at their lowest ebb. After two years of undergraduate teaching in Sydney with neither time nor funds for research, Barnes was invited by Vice-Chancellor Melville of the ANU to apply for the anthropology chair in the Research School of Pacific Studies which had been vacated by the premature death of Siegfried Nadel. Edmund Leach had already been approached, but in a reprise of their earlier side-step, Leach left the field to Barnes by deciding to remain in Cambridge. John 'jumped at the possibility of moving from an impoverished teaching department to a well-funded research school' (Ibid: 143).

Within a month of taking over the Department of Anthropology and Sociology he had drafted a report on its current research interests

and future directions, which listed a dozen ambitious research topics that could be studied in 'various places in the Pacific region' (see Wilson and Young 1996). Despite broader administrative responsibilities (the department then included Pacific Linguistics and Pacific Prehistory), John never regretted going to Canberra, and for a decade he managed an expanding anthropology programme that contributed significantly to the anthropology of Papua New Guinea, especially the highlands. Another achievement was the compilation, under John's direction, of a comprehensive *Ethnographic bibliography of New Guinea*, published in three volumes (1968). The appointment in 1958 of Bill Epstein (who had been John's junior colleague at Manchester and who subsequently succeeded him in the ANU chair), brought more African research experience to bear on New Guinea, notably among the Tolai of New Britain.

John was involved in the founding of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies in Canberra and served as an executive member in 1962–63. Just as he had rectified his ignorance of Aboriginal anthropology (producing in 1967 the technically brilliant *Inquest on the Murngin*), so had he quickly mastered the burgeoning New Guinea literature. Famously, on board ship bound for the Pacific Science Association Congress at Honolulu, he wrote a seminal article 'African models in the New Guinea Highlands', which was subsequently rejected by three journals before being published in *Man* (1962) and anthologised several times. Although bereft of citations and sources, it proved to be one of the most influential papers in the history of Melanesian anthropology. When I suggested that this must be his most oft-cited paper, he corrected me: it was in fact 'Class and committees in a Norwegian island parish' (1954) in which he introduced the notion of social network.³ Network analysis became a stock-in-trade of the Manchester School, although he later confessed that the technical literature on social networks had outstripped his ability (and his wish) to keep abreast of it.

Although he did no field research in the Australasian region, Barnes travelled widely, visiting students at their field sites and planning research policy. In Australia he visited Yuendumu and Ernabella, camped with Les Hiatt in Arnhemland, and took Max Gluckman to see Marie Reay at Borroloola. He made several trips to Papua New Guinea where, indulging his passion for bush-walking, he visited Maurice Godelier among the Baruya, Olga (van Rijswijck) Gostin among the Kuni, and Lyle Steadman among the Hewa. He also stayed

³ Personal communication, 7 January 1992.

with Baas Terweil in a Thailand monastery and with Don Miller in a village in northeast India. More contentiously, he flew to Sarawak to retrieve his crusading colleague, Derek Freeman – for which the latter never forgave him.

Indeed, Freeman was one of the private reasons John Barnes decided to leave the ANU. Rather to his own surprise again, he was appointed in 1969 to the first Chair of Sociology at Cambridge. For one who, as he put it, 'tended to shy away from the academic battlefield' he became embroiled in a number of irksome conflicts during his career and those of Cambridge were no exception. Later he would tell Jack Goody: 'if I'd known what it would be like I wouldn't have come'.⁴ His arrival coincided with student unrest and the nervous University authorities grew increasingly hostile to his Social and Political Sciences Committee and the subversive implications of the SPS Tripos. In his inaugural lecture John attempted to soften the iconoclastic edges of sociology, to such an extent that Percy Cohen complained in *Man* that the lecture 'will hardly set the Cam on fire'. That had not been John's intention; he had 'merely hoped to explain to the University why its sociology students might try to burn its buildings' (Cohen 1971: 721–2; Barnes 1990: 181–2). Hampered by lack of funds and a University reluctant to accord Sociology full autonomy, he felt he was 'the virtual head of a scarcely even virtual department'. In compensation, he found 'a generous and friendly haven' in Churchill College of which he had been elected a Professorial Fellow.

Despite its frustrations, the 1970s were a productive decade for John during which he published over ninety items, including three books and forty book reviews.⁵ *Three styles in the study of kinship* (1971) was a critical tour-de-force that deconstructed the kinship theories of G.P. Murdock, Meyer Fortes, and Claude Lévi-Strauss; although John regarded it as incomplete, it bears re-reading today for its analytical sophistication. He published little on kinship thereafter and his last major statement, 'Kinship studies: some impressions of the current state of play' (1980) concluded with the hope that new mathematical tools might enable Firth's micro-sociology and Lévi-Strauss' structuralism to 'form a new synthesis' (Barnes 1990: 180).

During the 1970s John cultivated his concern with professional ethics. *Who should know what? Social science, privacy and ethics* (1979) was the intellectual fruit: an investigation into the ethics of social research as

⁴ Interview with Jack Goody, 19 December 1983, filmed and edited by Alan Macfarlane and Sarah Harrison. Department of Anthropology, University of Cambridge.

⁵ See Barnes 1990 for a full bibliography of his works up to 1988.

it impinges on personal privacy. He documented a historical shift in the balance of power between researchers and their subjects and explored another of his pet themes: the feedback phenomenon of social science and the absorption of its findings into the public 'pool of common sense'.

We must recall that Barnes was trained as a mathematician and did wartime work on radar research; and before he left Canberra in 1969 he was already fiddling with FORTRAN. His appreciation of what he called 'the aseptic logical imperturbability of mathematics' appears to have informed his methodological articles on genealogies, divorce rates, network theory, and stochastic variation. Among the problems that preoccupied him was the difference between the natural and the social sciences on the one hand and between the social sciences and the humanities on the other. He also pondered the validity of the claim that sociology (and anthropology) is a social science. What precisely does 'science' mean when it is modified by the adjective 'social'? Judged by the criteria of natural science, sociology is not very scientific at all: 'an established corpus of interconnected and validated social laws, which would be a hallmark of scientific respectability, is embarrassingly absent' (Barnes 1990: 198).

An unabashed empiricist, he believed in 'a real world we call nature which exists independently of whatever social construction of reality we adopt', and, as a (peripheral) member of Gluckman's Manchester School, he was primarily interested in 'what really happens'. He also believed that few practising scientists of any discipline take much notice of what philosophers of science have to say about ontology and epistemology – hence his dictum: 'the philosophy of social science is too important to be left to the philosophers'. His firm view was that social science should be concerned with the construction of models ('reconstructions of nature for the purpose of study') rather than with the search for social laws. And like a gifted toy-maker, he constructed models galore, including models of modelling 'for fun'.

In 1982 John seized the opportunity for early retirement from Cambridge, and for the next decade, until Frances became too poorly to endure long flights, they shuttled back and forth, avoiding Canberra's winters by spending summers in Britain with three of their four children (only Rory, the eldest, remained in Australia). In 1984 John returned to the ANU as a Visiting Professor in the Research School of Social Sciences – which he thought (mistakenly) would be a safe distance from Derek Freeman's intermittent harassment. Settled in the Sociology Department (headed by his erstwhile Honours student, Frank Jones), John continued to write, notably *A pack of lies: towards a sociology of lying* (1994). Premised on the human capacity for deceit, this is a wittily erudite work which

concludes that good reasons can be found in all societies for lying some of the time, and equally, pragmatic reasons for not lying all of the time. Like his earlier collection, *Models and interpretations: selected essays* (1990), it bore the stylistic hallmarks of his engaging prose: mildly self-deprecating with an urbane twinkle of wit. For an example of dry, donnish humour, subscribers to the *AAS Newsletter* can read John's tongue-in-cheek, postprandial address to Churchill College fellows in 1984. 'Where lies the truth?' tells how he became a professor of sociology at Cambridge despite a lack of qualifications; it plays upon his ignorance of Latin, despite having taken the school certificate examination no fewer than five times without gaining a credit (*AAS Newsletter* 1996).

In 2000 I sent John a copy of an obituary I had written for Bill Epstein with an apologetic covering note to the effect that it might be considered 'dismal' to be remembered more for the jokes one has told than for one's academic writings. John responded: 'I don't find this a dismal thought at all! There are lots of worse things one might be remembered for.'⁶ He certainly had an endless store of wry anecdotes about the foibles of his senior colleagues. A couple of examples: Reo Fortune refused to work among the Yao of Central Africa on the grounds that he had already worked among the Yao of China 'and might get them confused'; Daryll Forde claimed to have read the copy of Lévi-Strauss's *Les Structures Élémentaires de la Parenté* (1949) that he lent to John, only for John to find that the pages remained uncut. In 1987 he wrote a memoir of Evans-Pritchard for the British Academy, and when asked why he hadn't mentioned E-P's homosexuality, he replied that he hadn't mentioned his heterosexuality either: neither seemed relevant to E-P's scholarly achievement.

My own personal relations with John Barnes were unfailingly cordial, and although I never told him, I felt that I owed him a great deal. He was neither my official supervisor nor my mentor in the conventional sense; he was, rather, a patron (however old-fashioned that may sound). For it had been my good fortune to meet Professor Barnes in 1964, when, having failed to find sponsorship for fieldwork in Nigeria, I applied for a research scholarship at the ANU on Phyllis Kaberry's advice. John interviewed me in Cambridge and I was duly awarded the scholarship that changed my destiny. Five years later, he happened to be on the Faculty of Archaeology and Anthropology appointments committee in Cambridge when I was interviewed for an assistant lectureship in Meyer Fortes' department; the fact that I was appointed to replace Reo Fortune was an irony he might have enjoyed.

⁶ Epstein (1924–1999) 2000. Personal communication, JAB to MWY, 11 May 2000.

John was also a Press Syndic when I submitted my doctoral thesis to Cambridge University Press; *Fighting with food* was duly accepted for publication in 1971. I do not recall ever mentioning to John these gestures of patronage – as they seemed to me – and I doubt that he would have regarded them as such. (*Humping my drum* recounts many instances of personal moral dilemmas to which he responded with the highest ethical standards, and it was professional ethical concern that motivated him to write *Who should know what?*) A more unambiguous gesture of trust occurred when he lent me the keys to his caravan, situated permanently on a block of land fronting the Queanbeyan River to the south of Canberra. It was bush retreat that my family enjoyed for several years during his absences abroad.

For one who enjoyed bush-walking as much as John it was especially cruel to become house-bound. *Humping my drum* was written as Parkinson's encroached and he was losing his balance, his sight and his voice – but not his lively mind. John Barnes's life's journey ended 'in exile' at the ripe old age of 92 on 13 September 2010 in a village outside Cambridge. His last book ends with a clear-eyed meditation on his dual citizenship, one given, the other chosen: 'though my head lies in Britain, my heart lies in Australia'. He will be remembered with affection in both countries, not least for his impish humour, flashing eyebrows and infectious giggle. After a short illness, his devoted wife Frances died on 10 December 2010. They are survived by their four children, eight grandchildren and one great grandchild.

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JOHN BARNES – AN APPRECIATION

PAUL HENLEY

This piece is meant to be about John's academic life. Needless to say, this is a truly daunting task. Equally needless to say, it is an impossible task. Over more than 60 years, John published on a vast array of topics within social anthropology and adjacent fields, he held numerous posts, he had legions of colleagues, dozens of graduate students of which I had the singular luck to be one.

John was a genuine polymath. In his autobiography – with the somewhat debatable title, *Humping my drum* – rhyming with 'Kingdom Come', a reference to an Australian folk song – he recalls a moment when he challenged the mathematical allusions of the celebrated American sociologist and Boston Brahmin, George Homans, during a seminar: 'Young man', said Homans, 'have you studied the calculus?'. The answer of course was 'yes': for John was a real mathematician by training, though he missed out on becoming a Wrangler during his undergraduate career here at Cambridge. He then had to decide whether to study astronomy or anthropology. The anthropology prospectus promised the opportunity to address the questions of the origins of civilisation and the meaning of culture. In *Humping my drum*, completed in 2007, he confesses that he had still not found the answers to those questions – yet...

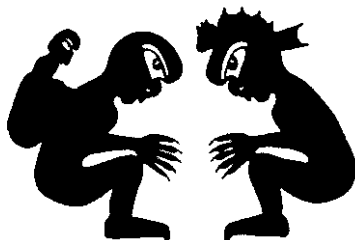
John was to become a classical anthropological fieldworker in locations as diverse as south-central Africa, Papua New Guinea and Norway. In some incarnations, he was a sociologist, in others an ethicist whilst he was also one of the leading academic experts on lying. That is ON lying, I hasten to add, not AT lying – for John as an academic was as straight and honest as the day is long. In the autobiography, he flagellates himself for being economical with the truth when, during his Australian period, Derek Freeman came to seek his support for his application to a professorial post that he, John, had been offered in confidence and had already accepted. If only all our peccadilloes were so slight!

This then can only be a sort of sporadic personal memoir, a few vignettes of my experience of John in academic life. I'm sure that this is what John would have wanted since he was a great lover of anecdotes, particularly humorous ones. He loved to tell them. I can see him now, as I suppose many of you can, mouth wide open, eyes sparkling, eyebrows

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