

14 *Tribute to Ken Hale: our 1960 collaboration*

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Ken Hale's most outstanding attributes are his generosity of spirit and indomitability.¹ He first displayed these qualities to me early in 1959 when he arrived in Australia on an NSF grant to do two years' fieldwork on Australian Aboriginal languages.

When he heard that my wife, Alix, and I were on summer fieldwork in South Australia, he proposed that he and I undertake an ambitious field trip the following year to the West that would take us half way around the continent. I was delighted to acquiesce, for there were very few trained linguists in Australia at that time. I was hoping to get accepted into a graduate program at Indiana University under Carl Voegelin, Ken's former supervisor. (Ken's subsequent letter of support was to play a crucial role in shaping the course of my family's and my lives).

In February 1960, Ken and I made our separate ways to Port Augusta, South Australia, and met on the railway platform there. At first I didn't see him, as he hung back modestly in the shadows. After we met, we piled into his Land Rover and drove out of town to a salt flat to camp on, and promptly got mired up to the axles in soft mud. That it took only two hours to get out of that situation was due to Ken's doggedness and capacity for sheer hard physical labour. All the while, he kept his cool.

There soon followed a 1500-mile trip west to Perth, during which we met a number of Aboriginal people and recorded data in five languages in three days. I felt humbled by Ken's incredible capacity for mental exertion: he would squat with pen, blue paper, and clipboard and, writing fast, very widely spaced, large, and bold notes, would have basic information on the pronominal system, case marking, verbal conjugations, tenses, moods, aspects, phonology, and so forth worked out during a morning's effort. All the while, he would be weaving into the database an amended version of the 100-item Swadesh list. (No wonder that many looked upon him in later years as the planet's greatest linguistic fieldworker!)

¹ This note originated as a tribute to Ken Hale on the occasion of his retirement from MIT and was posted along with many other tributes on the WWW in April 1999 at web.mit.edu/linguistics/www/ken/posted/posted.html#ogrady. A few additions and small corrections have been made.

'Let it emerge!' was one of his favourite dicta—as an outline sketch of the phonology of yet another language would flow forth from the data recorded by him. He brought to Australianists of that era a new awareness of a laminodental series of consonants which some researchers had simply missed.

Not that Ken's research in Australia involved just brief surveys. His very deep studies of Warlpiri and Lardil remain monuments to linguistic rigour and vigour to this day. And the Laughren–Hoogenraad dictionary of Warlpiri pioneered by him, and containing native speakers' vernacular essay-definitions covering each entry, represented a completely new departure in Australian linguistics.

On the highway (east of Norseman) we met a couple returning to Fraser Range station from shopping in Norseman, and they invited us to stay. Ken was not too keen on backtracking, and it was his vehicle. We might've gotten some very valuable material at Fraser Range. Mr Gull of Fraser Range was like one of Curr's correspondents, as I had corresponded with him and he filled out my questionnaire between September and December 1957.²

From Perth we headed north 1300 miles to Broome, staying three days in Northampton to work with Mr Jack Councillor, one of the last fluent speakers of Nhanta, whose usual occupation was exercising racehorses. Ken reflected that here was a man, the carrier of a linguistic and cultural tradition priceless beyond measure, and reflecting 40,000 years of human evolution in Australia, exposed to whimsical danger from a potentially misplaced hoof.

In Roebourne, Ken worked with Mr Bob Churnside on the Ngarluma language. We were to stay there three weeks as the guests of an independent group of Aboriginal people who were engaged in mining activities. They had two requests to make of us: that we provide them with an alphabet for the Nyangumarta language, and that we bring two of their number—Mr Monty Hale (Minyjurn) and Punch (Kupangu)—to literacy in the time available. Ken's insights on alphabet-creation and literacy development were of immense value, and today, nearly forty years later, there is a thriving literacy program at Strelley, out of Port Hedland, in Nyangumarta and English. As well, the periodical *Mikurrunya* is brought out in both languages in partial fulfilment of the principle, due to Ken, of 'flood the place with literature!' Ken was also to provide crucial input to the Northern Territory Bilingual Program in 1974.

The camp outside Roebourne was also where we met the legendary Don McLeod (1908–99), some days after our arrival. An assembly was held in the bed of a creek, to which Ken and I were invited. McLeod (known in Nyangumarta as Ngarnkawaru for his beard) addressed the gathering, and it was clear he enjoyed the complete confidence of the Mob. Ken and I were visited later still by the Roebourne Police, who stated that we had no right to be staying in an Aboriginal camp. They departed without taking further action, however. (I suspect that just a few years earlier the situation might have turned out very differently.) Near the end of our stay in the camp, the area was side-swiped by a cyclone/willy-willy passing well to the west down the coast, and some of the Mob were looking to

² Ed. note: The vocabulary attributed to Gull is included as No.25 'Malba (=Galagu?)' in O'Grady (1957–58:2–19). Hubert Lawson Courthope Gull (1887–1967) was the leaseholder of Fraser Range station from 1913 until the 1960s. Lawson Gull had learnt quite a lot of the local language Marlba (Ngadju). However Mick Cotter (pers. comm. to David Nash, Coolgardie, 25 November 2000) was in 1957–60 managing the property in Gull's absence, and it was he who completed the questionnaire by interviewing two men employed at the station.

cavities in the rocks as possible places of refuge. But the strong east winds hauled around to the northwest and eased.

From Broome we turned east for the 900-mile drive to Newcastle Waters in the Northern Territory. A hitchhiker called Syd had joined us (for a thousand-mile hitch, as it turned out). The summer monsoonal season was just ending, and at the crossing over the Fitzroy River a hundred miles east of Broome we were told that there was a bridge eighteen inches under the fast-flowing water. There were no visible guard rails, and crocodiles were known to be in the area. Here again, Ken displayed his characteristic *sangfroid*, driving over the submerged bridge as if this were an everyday activity.

Later that evening we were camped by the roadside when a truck loomed out of the darkness and stopped just short of us. Silence followed. Suddenly several solid-sounding objects thudded into the sand nearby. These turned out to be bottles of beer, and a voice called from the truck, "Have one on Diesel Dick!" Needless to say, we three quaffed the beer, highly amused by the whole situation. (Thirty years later, an older and wiser Ken remarked on the tragedy of people like Diesel Dick—a fluent speaker of Nyigina—who needlessly foreshorten their lives with excessive use of the demon drink).

There followed the most harrowing section of the 'road', now a track washed out here and there by the tropical rains, from Inverway to Top Springs. On one memorable stretch, we covered only 108 miles in a full day of driving. That evening culminated in an exhausted Ken's driving into a deep, narrow gutter which extended across the road. The right front wheel was badly bent, and we were scores of miles from possible help. By sheer determination, gutsiness, and practical know-how Ken gradually hammered the wheel straight.

'Indomitable': that word sums up the essence of Ken Hale. (And he can get really angry, which he did 1.5 miles east of Top Springs—but that's another story). In later years, he maintained steadfastly that the amount of linguistic knowledge gained on the trip was not commensurate with the huge distances covered over difficult roads.

I am honoured to be numbered among his friends, and am truly delighted to dedicate these reminiscences to him.

Dad also shared another story about being at the camp of Don McLeod who Dad says over the course of one evening turned him around politically. Up to that point, Dad says he was an Arizona cowboy and as such a sort of Goldwater Republican by default. They went to the part of the country where Geoff O'Grady was from and spoke the language and there they stayed with the infamous, rabble rousing, union organizing, Don McLeod. Don and Dad sat around the camp fire deep into the night talking politics. Dad said he was impressed by what Don had to say. He said he was the first person he had talked to who seemed to actually have the interests of the local people in mind. He was the first white person he had met who spoke to the Aborigines in straight English instead of this kind of patronising broken English he had heard until that point. So they talked and talked. Dad was sitting on his bed roll which he had stood upright and eventually as the night progressed and Don kept talking and talking Dad grew tired and sleepy and eventually fell right off his bed roll onto the ground. Don apologized profusely and let Dad go off to bed. But he said that night totally changed his perspective on politics and after that he was a champion of Don's work and his more enlightened point of view.

—Ezra Hale

Reference

- O'Grady, Geoffrey N., 1957–58, Materials on the suffixing languages of Western Australia. MS, Anthropology Dept., University of Sydney. Photocopy. MS 320 AIATSIS.