

GEOFF O'GRADY: A PERSONAL APPRECIATION

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In the mid 1950s I was assisting Dr A. Capell who was in charge of the Linguistics section in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Sydney. One morning a letter arrived from a well-educated young jackaroo¹ from Wallal Downs, a lonely sheep station at the edge of the desert in the Eighty Mile Beach area of north-western Western Australia. The writer gave his name as Geoff O'Grady, originally from South Australia, and said that he had an interest in languages, and having lived in close contact with Nyangumarda-speaking Aborigines at Wallal Downs, he had learned to speak the language quite well, with the Aborigines gladly teaching him and appreciating his interest in the language. He was now writing to Dr Capell asking for advice on how to further his study of it. He enclosed materials which he had collected in the language and which clearly demonstrated that he had an excellent natural gift and talent for language work. Dr Capell wrote back to him giving him hints and advice, and what Geoff O'Grady sent back a short time later was so good that it was felt that he should come to the University of Sydney to study for a Bachelor of Arts degree in linguistics. This he did gladly and appeared there a short time later. It was immediately evident that he had a far-reaching knowledge of the Nyangumarda language, and was able to pronounce it perfectly without much previous phonetic training—no mean feat for a 'white fellow'. In Sydney, he also began to study Hungarian and his ability to pronounce it correctly, which even phonetically well-trained English speakers find very difficult, was astonishing. He progressed well with his studies and became highly competent in linguistics in general and in Australian Aboriginal linguistics in particular.

He had a colourful personality, with the far outback which had been his home and life for years, often becoming noticeable as a backdrop to his personality. I recall one incident when we were all in the corridor outside the offices, and the phone rang in Dr Capell's office which was then unoccupied. Geoff yelled "Run for your lives!" and started running towards the room with the phone, not away from it!

I moved to Canberra to the Australian National University while Geoff was completing his Arts degree. He then decided that he wanted to further his studies overseas, and followed an invitation to undertake PhD studies in linguistics at Indiana University in Bloomington under Professor Carl Voegelin. This gave him an introduction to a new linguistic world, the American Indian, in which he also showed remarkable talent. I had the opportunity to meet him there repeatedly again, collaborate with him and to enjoy his friendship and colourful and unusual personality. When, after a teaching year at Northwestern University at Evanston, I moved around the USA I was invited to spend a period at Flagstaff, Arizona, by Carl Voegelin who regularly went there to work in Amerindian languages. Geoff was also there,

¹ Hence the 'boundary rider' of the volume's title.

and accommodation was provided for me and my wife, Helen, in a small western-style blockhouse in a blockhouse area in the forest where other scholars were also spending some time. Geoff met us when we rolled up in our old Chevrolet, showed us to our blockhouse and explained the facilities of it and around it, pointing out also the waste-dump not far away which was a rolled-in dump of about five metres square. We were to throw refuse in there. What he forgot to mention was that this refuse-dumping area was a favourite haunt of a considerable number of skunks, especially after dark, and when somebody threw something in there and accidentally hit a foraging skunk, it was a matter of how fast one could run to reach the door of one's house before the enraged skunks had a chance to take action...

Work was carried out in Amerindian languages there, especially in Hopi and also Navaho, but there was time for pleasure and entertainment. One evening there was a great powwow, an Indian feast with participants from many tribes, with speakers in their languages and lots of dancing in their colourful garbs and ornaments. Large fires were built from logs standing in the shape of Indian tepees, with the flames rising high and illuminating the whole area. The Indians danced around the fires, and Geoff got very excited—he loves large camp fires, and he jumped up and joined the dancing Indians...

In spite of his engagement in Amerindian studies, he always kept up his connection with his first linguistic love, Australian Aboriginal languages, even after he had taken his PhD and moved first to Edmonton in Canada, and then to the University of Victoria on Vancouver Island, British Columbia. His association with Ken Hale, who had worked for a long time in Aboriginal linguistics in Australia, proved very fruitful, and Geoff came back to Australia repeatedly to carry on his work in Aboriginal languages in conjunction with Ken Hale. On one of these field trips in Western Australia, while heading north towards Geoff's old stamping grounds in the Eighty Mile Beach and Wallal Downs area, they were camping not far from the road in a southern area where Aboriginal cultural manifestations such as songs had not been heard for quite some time. At their camp site, they started singing Aboriginal songs and clapping sticks Aboriginal-style, much to the consternation of passers-by who were wondering how Aborigines had appeared again in the area!

Geoff was disinclined to write long letters and was not a good correspondent. When Thomas Sebeok, the editor of the large serial publication *Current Trends in Linguistics* asked Geoff O'Grady to be the Assistant Editor of volume 8 of the series (i.e. *Linguistics in Oceania* which was published by Mouton in 1971), Geoff preferred to conduct assistant editorial business on the telephone rather than in writing. I was one of the Associate Editors of the volume, and I remember having long telephone conversations with him, with me in the eastern part of the USA and Geoff in Victoria, Canada.

Geoff has always been a very friendly person, fiercely loyal, always ready to help and give advice from his great store of linguistic knowledge, Aboriginal languages and Amerindian studies. His loyalty to the cause has found its crowning piece of work in his study of comparative Pama-Nyungan, the largest family of Australian Aboriginal languages, in the volume he co-edited with Darrell Tryon (published in 1990 by *Pacific Linguistics*).

Much good has been written about Geoff O'Grady as a linguist and his valuable contributions to Australian and Amerindian linguistics. May this little yarn from one of his oldest friends depict him as a person and human being, set into some little anecdotes remembered from the long ago.