

Per Scribendum, Sumus

Ethnopoesis, or: Writing Heritage

edited by

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The Attitude of Education

Alastair McIntosh

Albert Einstein! I always warn students about quoting him in their scholarly work. Many of the attributed folksy sayings, and most of the mystical ones, are fabrications. I suggest to my students that if they are going to quote the genius in the hope of basking in reflected glory, then check and give the original source. If they do not, they are no Einstein.

Mahatma Gandhi! The same goes, but in mitigation of the passage I am about to use, there is a slight difference. Some might make out that Einstein was a mystic, but nobody is trying to make out that Gandhi was a nuclear scientist. As far as I am aware, he confined himself to the morality of such issues. For example (Ghandi in Merton 1965: 32): 'So far as I can see, the atomic bomb has deadened the finest feeling that has sustained mankind for ages ... What has happened to the soul of the destroying nation is yet too early to see.'

With acknowledgement that I have been unable to pin down the original source, if any, allow me then to use one of my favourite quotes attributed to the Mahatma. It certainly fits well with his spirit. Reputedly, and according to many a poster that people used to buy in what were called 'head shops', he said: 'Nothing has saddened me so much in life as the hardness of heart of educated people.'

It is one thing to say what is wrong in the world, but quite another to say or show what can be right. Thinking of Máiréad Nic Craith brought Gandhi's line to mind for me because she embodies the antithesis of the problem that he identified. Máiréad has been a student's professor. Yes, she has ticked all the academic boxes. Her ethnography built itself up from a base amongst the Irish people, reaching out to peoples everywhere, translating between languages and cultures. But what most interests me is teaching. Universities are stuffed full of researchers. But researchers are a bit like angels. God already has plenty of them hanging out in Heaven. It is in more worldly realms, not to mention down in the bowels of Hell, that more are needed.

Academics who put students first have become more and more rare during my lifetime. Time was, thinking back to Aberdeen University in the 1970s, when some professors would even have the first-year students round for cheese and wine. These days, that is a rarity. I vividly recall a more senior colleague giving me a few words of advice when I taught human ecology for a few years in the Faculty of Science and Engineering at Edinburgh University, back in the 1990s.

'Why do you spend so much time with the students, Alastair? It's not going to get you anywhere.'

He was right. It was not going to help with the grant grubbing. At one faculty meeting, we were prodded to fissure into several papers across different journals what could otherwise have been published as a single, well-rounded piece of scholarly work. Giving time to student supervision was not going to help with making time for that counting game. This was the brave new world of laying the public resources built up over generations in our universities on the altar of the private sector. In Islam, it is said that notions of 'intellectual property' are a sin, because all wisdom comes from God. It was not going to stamp TM ('that's mine') onto anything that could be marketed.

Ethnographers such as Máiréad know the truth of what I once heard said by the transpersonal psychologist and mythologist, Ralph Metzner: 'Stories tell us about our past; visions tell us about our future.'¹ Like at the oars, we row forwards looking backwards. If I might apply that to the academy, at the time when Máiréad's career was rising into its full power, British academia was being thrust down the corporate road. The 1993 science White Paper, *Realising Our Potential*, shook the academy far beyond its science faculties. Shock waves ran through the humanities, too, as it laid out the Conservative government's vision 'to achieve a key cultural change ... between the scientific community, industry and government departments,' including 'spin-in' from the civil to the defence sector, because, 'as the Gulf conflict illustrated, technology can provide the decisive edge in military operations' (cited in McIntosh 1996: 51).

On the one hand, under the wise leadership of the principal, Sir David Smith, and his deputy, Professor Barry Wilson, Edinburgh University, where I was at this time, was pioneering action and teaching to tackle climate change (see, e.g., Loening et al. 1991). On the other hand, the very qualities of empathy, responsiveness and depth that were required were being undermined. As public bodies, universities had to bend with the political wind.

My sense is that for Máiréad and her colleague-husband, Professor Ullrich Kockel, the response was to bend but not break. Both at the Academy of Irish Cultural Heritages at the University of Ulster and at the Intercultural Research

¹ Pers. com. at the conference of the International Transpersonal Association, Killarney, Ireland, 25 May 1994. Ralph is of the original 1960s counterculture trio along with the late Timothy Leary (of Irish descent) and Ram Dass, a.k.a. Richard Alpert, a Hindu spiritual teacher from a Jewish family. When Ralph told me that he loves Scotland because his mother came from Ayrshire, I quipped: 'So that explains it: the psychedelic revolution started from a Scotsman, an Irishman and a Jew.'

Centre at Heriot-Watt University in Edinburgh, they have succeeded in positioning their work so that mainstream funds could be accessed—on such themes as human migration and tourism—but to hold fast to the humanities calling of visioning the human condition. More than that, in this marriage of scholars they have lived it.

I set about writing this piece today because on Twitter, one of the IRC's students, Cait O'Neill McCullagh, had commented that the Heriot-Watt unit 'is an incredible place to study heritage. As a practicing curator and archaeologist, I chose [it] for my PhD because of the rich and diverse hands-on experience, academic expertise and human understanding held in this centre'; to this I responded: 'The reason why it's an incredible place to study is very simple. Its leadership team give high priority to being there for students. Their research synergises with that. Oh, and they also pay astute attention not just to thinking, but to competent admin. You'll know who I mean ;)' (@kittyjmac on Twitter, 4 June 2019, responded to by @alastairmci.).

That wink was intended, as everybody would guess, for its director, Prof. Máiréad Nic Craith. I had experienced that constellation of care at first hand when, in 2007-08, I undertook a PhD by published works with Ulli and Máiréad. Ulli was my supervisor, but the two were inseparable. It was the way that they held students—all of their students from what I could see—that most impressed me. Here was the antithesis to which I referred earlier, of the hard-heartedness of the educated.

It was not that Ulli and Máiréad were academically a soft touch. Máiréad especially was a stickler for keeping the administration and protocol of things all present and correct. It was the kindness, often expressed through very practical hospitality including numerous parties and suppers, with which they hosted us. To be one of their students felt like being their guests. They had their research and administration to field, but there was no doubt that student wellbeing and expansion of mind was their priority.

I do not have a lot more to say about it than that. But what I can do, to close this short piece, is to reflect on why it matters. The title of this festschrift collection is *Per scribendum, sumus!* 'By writing, we are.' When Máiréad and Ulli put me up to the idea of undertaking a PhD by published works with them—my book *Soil and Soul* and a dozen supporting scholarly articles—they said they were suggesting it because to have a PhD would open doors in my future work, but also, the opportunity to draw together past publications would give an opportunity to take stock of what I had done and where I might take it forward. In Ralph Metzner's terms, to reflect upon the story that I had come from, and vision the future.

These days, it can be too readily forgotten that a PhD is meant to be about original contributions to knowledge. Writing my thesis pushed me to ask what that had been. I gave it the title, *Some Contributions of Liberation Theology to Community Empowerment in Scottish Land Reform, 1991–2003* (McIntosh 2008). The framework that The Academy of Irish Cultural Heritages provided me with allowed me to see that my work had been about liberation theology (and not to flinch from that), about community empowerment, and focussed on modern Scottish land reform from the genesis of the Isle of Eigg Trust to the passing of the Land Reform (Scotland) Act in the Scottish Parliament.

It was not that Máiréad and Ulli did much. As an already seasoned academic who had second supervised the PhDs of others, I did not need a lot of help. What they did, and what I saw them doing for many others, is that they held the space. The Quaker writer, Parker Palmer, speaks of holding ‘spaces that are hospitable to the soul’. That is what I experienced. That is also what I have always tried to do for my own students too. They do not need you to fill their space for them. They do need a container to be held, in which they can explore their ideas and let the brew ferment to completion. They need it to be held firmly but creatively and, if I might say so, with love.

Such is the ‘maieutics’ that Socrates saw as being the function of the educator. His mother had been a midwife. Education, as he saw it, is the art of giving birth to philosophy as philo-Sophia—the love of the Goddess of Wisdom.

Máiréad, supported by Ulli, has fulfilled that role in furthering the scholarly birth of many of us. She has deepened us on that journey of love. It helps to take away the hard-heartedness of the educated. It expresses Gandhi’s *satyagraha*—truth force, soul force or God-force—that is the hope for healing of the world. I can but join with others, saying *thank you*.

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Mairéad Nic Craith's research has sought to integrate critical heritage studies, cultural history, literature and folklore into a creative ethnology. Issues of community and place, memory and nostalgia are key themes in her work. The tensions around forms, definitions and uses of heritage are picked up in the contributions to this book. Research essays engage with the wide range of topics Mairéad has explored. Other contributions note her support and mentoring or illustrate the author's appreciation of her work through prose, music and artistic representations.

Ullrich Kockel teaches at Heriot-Watt University Edinburgh, the Latvian Academy of Culture and Vytautas Magnus University Kaunas. He is Emeritus Professor of Ethnology at Ulster University, a Member of the Royal Irish Academy, and Mairéad's anam cara.

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