

RICHARD SLOBODIN (1915–2005)

Richard Slobodin, premier ethnologist of the Dene and cosmopolitan scholar, died on January 22, 2005, six weeks before his 90th birthday. Born and educated in New York City, he earned BA and MS degrees from the City College of New York. While he was teaching in the city's school system, an opportunity arose for a canoeing adventure that would prove to be the start of his career in anthropology. In May 1938, two of Dick's friends left from New York City on a canoeing trip that was planned to terminate at Nome, Alaska. Dick joined them at Winnipeg and with Robert Fuller proceeded northward, "hitchhiking, freight grabbing and canoeing," arriving at Fort McPherson in September. Dick writes of this first field trip as follows:

Although the trip was not undertaken for the purpose of serious ethnographic work, an attempt was made, with some success, to acquire the rudiments of the native language and to learn something of the folk lore and obsolete and obsolescent techniques. Some demographic notes were also made during this visit. (Slobodin, 1962:11)

In May 1939, after spending the winter around Fort McPherson, Slobodin and Fuller travelled by dog sled and later by canoe over the mountains into Alaska. "We waded through water running with broken ice for many days," Fuller told a *New York Times* reporter who interviewed them in Fairbanks (Anonymous, 1939:28).

After this adventure, Dick enrolled in anthropology classes at Columbia University, but in 1942 the war brought the first of two interruptions in his anthropological career. After serving briefly in the US Army, he entered the Naval Flight Program. In a squadron of Grumman Hellcats, he flew across the country to California. Eventually he joined the crew of the aircraft carrier *Bunker Hill*, on which he served mainly as an intelligence officer.

In August 1946, Dick returned to the Mackenzie specifically to study the social organization of the Peel River Kutchin (now rendered Gwich'in). This research was to form the basis of his doctoral dissertation, but its completion would be delayed for more than a decade. Meanwhile, he began his university career with appointments at the University of Southern California (1947–49) and Los Angeles State College (1950–51). At this point, the widely cast net of Senator Joseph McCarthy and his committee resulted in Dick's being blacklisted and thus excluded from academic employment. For the next seven years, he had to find work elsewhere, which included jobs as a carpenter's helper, truck driver, insurance clerk, and social case worker. Finally, he was offered a chance to continue his studies at Columbia, where he completed his thesis and received the PhD degree in 1959.

Regarding this second hiatus in his academic career, those of us who knew Dick fairly well could not conceive of his advocating the overthrow of a government or any other subversive activity. He perceived socialism as a



Richard Slobodin on a trip in the lower Mackenzie region during the winter of 1938–39.

means to achieve social justice. Nevertheless, his association with Marxism would again cast a shadow over him.

After a period as research assistant (Cornell University and Washington DC), Dick taught at Smith College before seeking employment in Canada with the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development. The spectre of the red scare prevented him from getting the required landed immigrant visa. Dick did receive a research contract from that agency (1962–64). Later he applied for a position at McMaster University, but was once more faced with government opposition regarding the visa. Eventually, strong letters of support from the chairman of the Sociology department, the faculty association, and the president helped secure the visa, and Dick was appointed at McMaster in 1964. In 1970 he became a Canadian citizen.

The 1960s, a period of considerable activity for Dick, included four field trips to the western Subarctic, several articles on the Gwich'in, and the publication of *Band Organization of the Peel River Kutchin* (1962). This book was based on his doctoral thesis but also considered changes that had occurred by the time of his 1961 field season.

During the 1960s and early 1970s, Dick was instrumental in developing anthropology at McMaster from a wing of Sociology into a separate department (1973) with the hiring of a number of scholars. His second monograph, *Metis of the Mackenzie Delta*, appeared in 1966. In keeping with Dick's global anthropological knowledge, he preceded his study of the Metis with an analysis of information on mixed-race peoples elsewhere in the world and a discussion of the fallacy of racial purity.

In the 1970s, Dick continued his scholarly production on such topics as reincarnation, chieftainship, and culture history. In a paper that appeared in the proceedings of the 1971 Northern Athapaskan Conference, he took his colleagues to task by comparing their work unfavourably, especially regarding lack of theory, with research in other parts of the world (Slobodin, 1973). Dick made his final

field trip to the Gwich'in in 1977, at age 62. The following year, he published a book on a new subject: British medical psychologist and anthropologist W.H.R. Rivers (Slobodin, 1978). While its first section was a biography of this multidimensional figure, Dick's analysis of Rivers' anthropological writing demonstrates his wide knowledge of the history of anthropology.

Dick fell victim in 1981 to the compulsory age-related retirement policy of the time. He regretted the necessity to retire, since he had held a permanent position for only 17 years. The major work of his retirement years was as contributing co-editor (with Antonia Mills) of *Amerindian Rebirth* (1994), in which he revived his early interest in reincarnation (cf. Slobodin, 1970) and expanded his coverage beyond the Gwich'in to North America in general.

During his retirement years, as well, Dick found relaxation in the seafaring novels of Patrick O'Brian. More serious interests included the activities of the United Church of Canada and support for the New Democratic Party, to which he was awarded a life membership. In these years Dick engaged in copious correspondence. He kept alive links with anthropology through exchanges of letters with colleagues. He also kept in touch with the people of the Mackenzie Delta, through correspondence with individuals and with the Gwich'in Tribal Council. In the 1990s, his letters became devoted more and more to human rights issues. These included opposition to drilling in the calving grounds of the Porcupine caribou herd, opposition to capital punishment, and especially, response to the requests of Amnesty International. In this cause, he wrote to governors of states, heads of state, and other high officials.

Despite these and other liberal commitments, Dick was staid and conservative in his demeanour and living habits. He had more than his fair share of personal disappointments and tragedies, which may account to some extent for the thin-skinned sensitivities that often made personal

contacts uncomfortable for him. At other times he could be a delightful raconteur, and his sly wit was always appreciated. He was modest to a fault, generous in his assessment of people, and paternal without being paternalistic. Dick will be sorely missed by his friends and more poignantly so by his family. His widow, Eleanor, has been most helpful to me in this task through sessions of enlightening conversation and by giving me access to his correspondence. His loss leaves a great void in her life, as well as in the lives of Dick's three children, four stepchildren, and their families.

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