



A McMaster retrospective: How publishing in a student journal helped to shape my career

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Alan G. Morris is Professor in the Department of Human Biology at the University of Cape Town. A Canadian by birth and upbringing, Professor Morris is also a naturalised South African. He has an undergraduate degree in Biology from Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo Ontario, and a PhD in Anatomy from the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. Professor Morris has published extensively on the origin of anatomically modern humans, and the Later Stone Age, Iron Age and Historic populations of Kenya, Malawi, Namibia and South Africa. In more recent years he has extended his skeletal biology knowledge to the field of forensic anthropology. Professor Morris' book 'Missing and Murdered' was the winner of the WW Howells Prize for 2013 from the American Anthropological Association. He has an additional interest in South African history and has published on the history of race classification, the history of physical anthropology in South Africa and on the Canadian involvement in the Anglo-Boer War. Professor Morris was selected as a visiting Fulbright Scholar in 2012-2013 and spent 9 months at The Ohio State University where he worked with American scholars on the 'Global History of Health' project. He is a council member of the Van Riebeeck Society for the Publication of Southern African Historical Documents, an associate editor of the South African Journal of Science and an elected member of the Academy of Science of South Africa..

I have been a professional physical anthropologist for over 35 years and as I approach the mandatory retirement age for South African academics at the end of this year, I have begun the common practice of looking back over the highlights of my own career. I certainly haven't slowed down and I know that I will continue active research and postgraduate student supervision for many years to come as an Emeritus Professor, but reaching the grand old age of 65 is indeed a milestone. My personal publication list of journal papers, books and popular science articles has now passed the 150 mark, but right back at the first entry on my list is a paper written by me while I was still a student in Canada and published in Volume 1, Number 1 of the *Journal of Anthropology at McMaster* (Figure 1).

As the old science fiction dialogue goes, this was a long time ago in a far away place, but writing that paper and getting it published was an important step in my development as a scientist that subsequent papers in weightier international journals has not diminished. *Nexus: the Canadian Student Journal of Anthropology* is the direct descendant the very journal in which I chose to submit my first paper and its relaunch has triggered me to share some of my memories from the start of my studies.

I was a reluctant anthropologist. My background was purely zoological with an undergraduate degree from what was then Waterloo Lutheran University (now Wilfrid Laurier). My primary interest was in fish taxonomy and by my senior year it was looking like I would spend my future life in hip waders

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Nexus is an annual graduate student publication of the McMaster University Department of Anthropology, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada. <http://www.journals.mcmaster.ca/nexus>

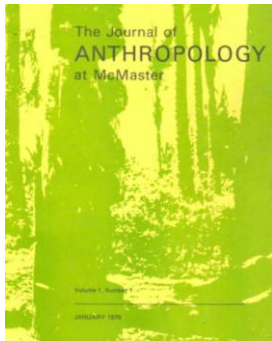


Figure 1. Volume 1, Number 1 of the *Journal of Anthropology at McMaster*

netting the creatures of Ontario rivers. WLU, like most Canadian universities, demanded that every student take a small number of courses outside of his or her major, and in my case I chose one called ‘Ethnography of Africa’ taught by Mathais Guenther, a young Assistant Professor not much older than me and still working on his PhD at the time. Mat was a social anthropologist who was studying Bushman (San) groups in Ghanzi, Botswana. Although Mat’s focus was purely cultural and little in kinship, social organisation and material culture really interested me, I did write a term essay for Mat on the biological origins of the San peoples of southern Africa. I chose an ecological model based on the Pleistocene studies that I had done in previous years and made a case that the San were the product of the late Pleistocene climatic changes and adaptation to desert environments. In hindsight, much of what I hypothesised was wrong, but the paper was pretty good if I do say so myself.

It was at Mat Guenther’s suggestion that I wrote to Phillip Tobias in Johannesburg enquiring about the possibility of studying the evolutionary origins of the San in South Africa and I took the liberty of enclosing a copy of my essay. It was an outside chance, but Tobias’ response soon made it a very real option. Tobias was prepared to consider my candidacy if I would spend a year expanding my zoological horizons to include anthropology. Anthropology was not particularly strong in Waterloo and there was no biological anthropology, so I wrote to McMaster University in Hamilton where I knew there was a good

programme in physical anthropology with an excellent reputation. Geoff Gaherty was the skeletal biologist at McMaster, but there was also archaeology under Bill Noble and a range of social anthropology courses including North American ethnology under David Damas, an expert on Inuit people. McMaster agreed to accept me for a non-degree ‘honours equivalent’ year.

The Department of Anthropology at McMaster provided lots of opportunities for me to explore this new subject. I chose my courses specifically to expand my knowledge. I took courses in social anthropology to learn something about social theory. David Damas’ course on the ethnology of North America was particularly good, especially when he talked about the peoples of the far north about whom he was an acknowledged expert. I took a full course in human evolution, but most importantly I began to explore archaeology as a profession. I went on my first ‘dig’, learning how to use a trowel to locate post-holes marking the edge of a long house in an Iroquoian village. Back in the lab I was able to use my zoological knowledge in the identification of different species of mammalian fauna amongst the fragments of recovered bone. I also began a project of ‘independent research’ under Geoff Gaherty on the pelvic anatomy of the Ossossene Burials. This was my first experience with human remains. The Ossossene site was a classic early 17th century Iroquoian ossuary where the bones of the dead of several years had been stored in the village and finally buried in a mass grave just before the village was moved. The dry bones were not only buried together, but they were mixed so that the spirits of the dead could not haunt the grave. No separate individuals could be identified in the sample, but it was possible to study a large number of specific bony elements.

It was the animal bones from the Iroquoian sites that particularly fascinated me because of my zoological background. The Department of Anthropology at McMaster stored the faunal remains from several Neutral Indian midden excavations, and I spent hours going through the samples isolating mandibles and mandibular

fragments of white-tailed deer. My project aged the deer from their dental development and chewing surface wear and the object was to examine the age-specific kill pattern of this important food resource. Were the native peoples hunting the deer by stalking young and old individuals (much like wolves do) or were they harvesting deer in a more non-selective manner? The answer was that they were killing deer of all ages which pointed to the drive-traps that had been seen by the early French travellers in Huronia.

In any other year my project would have simply been submitted for examination and gone into my course work file, but the fall of 1974 was the season for the planning of the new graduate student journal at McMaster and I was asked to write the project up for publication. This was peer pressure in action. It was also a fast learning curve in scientific writing. In hindsight I can see that the paper was too long, and I concentrated far too much on methods, but the result was number one on my publication list: Morris, AG (1975) Indian deer hunting methods as reflected by *Odocoileus virginiana* mandible remains in Neutral village middens, *Journal of Anthropology at McMaster* 1(1):19-30.

January 1975 was my departure date for South Africa, but the year at McMaster and its very first Morris publication left a substantial legacy. It would be six years before I was to write anything of similar scientific weight for a peer-reviewed journal. I had a new country to explore. My time was spent learning not only about human evolution and African archaeology but was also spent learning about South Africa and its problems. Tobias' Department of Anatomy at the University of the Witwatersrand was an island of progressive thought in the sea of apartheid. The academic structure was different. There were no graduate courses and examinations that would have been the focal point of Canadian students. South African academia was modelled on the British apprenticeship system and I was expected to learn by example in a pure research degree (Figure 2). Although it would be some time before I published a substantial paper again, the



Figure 2. Students and Professors at the University of Witwatersrand, South Africa in 1977. Raymond Dart second from left, Phillip Tobias second from right and the author on extreme right.

McMaster publication had given me the format that I used in conference presentations and it very much prepared me for the rigour of setting my thesis protocol and the methodology of gathering scientific data.

We don't have anything like Nexus in South Africa although we do push our post-graduate students to publish as much as we can. The closest we come is to make our local conferences as student-oriented as possible. I have been involved with the Anatomical Society of Southern Africa since the year of my arrival here and I ensure that every one of my students who has been doing biological anthropology or forensic research participates. I have found a similar student focus on the rare occasion when I have been able to attend the Canadian Association of Physical Anthropology meetings. These conferences along with student run journals like Nexus have an extremely important role in professional development. I know from personal experience that writing that first paper is a major life crisis, but it is an experience of great value. I am exceptionally pleased that Nexus has launched again in Hamilton after a five year break.

An Afterthought

It is certainly strange the way things work out. From what you have read above, it is clear that my career and personal life have been focussed in Africa. But it was not an absolute certainty that I would go to South Africa when I finished my courses at McMaster in May 1974. Although I had been in correspondence with

Tobias in Johannesburg, I was still very much undecided. I was attracted to archaeology as well as to physical anthropology and I found the research being done on the Iroquoian peoples at McMaster to be extremely interesting. My marks had been excellent and I duly applied for the programme of graduate study in Anthropology at McMaster. To my great surprise and displeasure, I was not accepted. I later found out that I had been caught in the war between the two divisions in the four fields of anthropology in the North

American system. Each year, the selection committee at McMaster had to strike a balance between the physical/archaeological and sociological/behavioural fields to ensure that there weren't too many students on one side or the other. I was too 'zoological' for the social scientists and they voted against my admission. I owe McMaster thanks for training me in the science of anthropology and the opportunity for my first scientific publication, but I guess I also owe it for launching me on my African career.