

6. Doktorvater

Klaus Neumann

Klaus Neumann is a historian who writes about historical justice, social memory and refugee policy. He is a research professor at the Swinburne Institute for Social Research in Melbourne.

‘I am certain that the doctorates here at The Australian National University have a very high international standing but I know almost nothing about the university systems of Germany and am therefore not in a position to make any comparisons between the two’, read the first response I received in early 1984 when exploring the possibility of applying for admission to The Australian National University’s PhD program. The respondent was Hank Nelson – the fact that he did not mention his position or title struck me at the time as being as noteworthy as the information his letter contained.

From others I learnt that in Australia, postgraduate students have *supervisors*. A supervisor, I was told, is not the same as a *Doktorvater* (literally ‘the father of the doctorate’), the senior academic looking after a doctoral student in Germany, Austria or Switzerland. I thought that was good news. In my experience, a *Doktorvater* (or *Doktormutter* – although some 30 years ago she would have still been very much an exception) was a rather elusive figure. German professors were notorious for not recalling the names of their doctoral students and could often be contacted only during a once-a-week, one-hour *Sprechstunde*, when students could be seen queuing outside their office for a precious five-minute audience. In my attempts to find a German professor to take on a student wanting to study the impact of colonial rule in Papua New Guinea, I had sent off several letters that had not met with a reply. In the end a historian specialising in late 19th and early 20th-century southern Africa agreed to be my *Doktorvater*. His main role would have been to examine my dissertation rather than to advise me on how to research and write it. He was however reputedly more conscientious than some of his colleagues, who met their doctoral students only twice: once to approve of their project and the second time to take receipt of the completed thesis.

I left my *Doktorvater* once ANU had offered me a PhD scholarship. As I was preparing to move to the other side of the world, Hank Nelson kept writing to me, patiently answering my many questions, trying to accommodate my ever-changing travel plans and putting up with my poorly-worded anxieties: ‘I am sorry to cause some hustle for you again’, I told him six weeks before my scheduled departure for Australia. ‘Please let me know in your next letter at which time and by which phone calling number you can be got’.

By then I was officially enrolled because I was expected to complete any necessary archival research in Europe before moving to Australia. The ANU student administrators, who would have been justifiably nervous about paying a stipend to a student they had never sighted, instructed me to furnish detailed fortnightly reports about my progress. I did exactly as I was told (or so I thought), only to be advised by Hank: 'I require only very brief reports – 1 page'. Although he had become my main point of contact with ANU, I hadn't yet understood that he was already my supervisor – but then I still did not know what exactly a supervisor's role was.

How Hank himself understood his role became clearer late one Saturday evening in June 1985 when I arrived at Canberra Railway Station carrying a backpack and a typewriter. Hank was there to pick me up and to deposit me at a college where he had booked a room for me. I can't recall what was said in our first encounter – or rather, I don't know because I do recall being horrified to discover that I could not comprehend Hank with his broad Australian accent. I did understand, however, that I was meant to explore Canberra's city centre the next morning and that Hank would pick me up in the afternoon to take me for a drive.

That Sunday, Hank tried hard to make me see the positives of Canberra. But by the end of the day, I was despondent. Having lived in Europe all my life, Civic (on a wintry Sunday morning in 1985!) wasn't exactly my idea of a city centre. And the fact that Hank took me to see an ugly bunker-like building in Mitchell, a very long way from anywhere, and told me that I would spend some considerable time there added to my despair.

I was amazed by the fact that Hank would spend his Sunday afternoon with a mere PhD student, including introducing him to his family. At the same time I was dismayed because I grasped so little of what he was trying to tell me. The next day, I met him again at ANU and told him that rather than schlep my typewriter to the National Archives in Mitchell, I needed to do an intensive English language course because I didn't understand him and was daunted by the prospect of having to write in English. That was the only time when Hank flatly refused a request of mine.

I was very tempted to run, to return home while it was still summer in Europe. But somehow Hank convinced me that it would only be a matter of time before my English comprehension and writing skills would be up to scratch. He did not comment on my intense dislike of Canberra but had no objections to my decamping to Sydney for a while. In fact, throughout my time at ANU he was very relaxed about my physical whereabouts. He must have been surprised when I later extended my fieldwork in Papua New Guinea from a few months to a couple of years, but he remained confident in my ability to eventually come

up with the goods. In October 1987, while I was in my second year of living in Raluana Village near Rabaul and had not yet produced a single draft chapter of my thesis, he wrote:

I wonder whether you ought to try a different location for some writing? I have no objection to you staying in Raluana, and I do not care much how long you take – although there are practical matters about visas and things like that. If you want to try a spell in Sydney or anywhere then do so. Do not ask for formal permission from ANU because it would only worry people. I raise this merely in case you are inhibited from going elsewhere for fear the bureaucratic wrath of ANU would fall upon you. My unofficial advice is to go wherever the typewriter taps most smoothly.

Hank took it upon himself to shield me from the university's rules and regulations – and more importantly, from those who took delight in enforcing them. I suspect he must have been asked to explain why his student was away in Papua New Guinea for a total of two years, but he never mentioned having to stand up for his wayward charge. I encountered the bureaucratic wrath of ANU only once, when I applied – initially unsuccessfully – for a substantial extension of my scholarship on account of having suffered from malaria. The student rep on the committee later told me that Hank had been blamed for my tardiness and rebuked by his colleagues for supervising me 'too loosely'.

Whether I was in Canberra, Sydney or Raluana, Hank kept talking to me. He sent me long letters; some of them were typed on letterhead paper, but most were handwritten on a notepad ('I hope you can read all this: It is the handwriting equivalent of age, a mouthful of buai and no teeth', he once noted apologetically). When I was at ANU, he tried to engage me in conversations in the Coombs tea room – over cups of coffee that tasted like anything but coffee.

Without my realising it, he tried to educate me: not only about PNG but also about Australian politics, history, literature, film and sport. While I foolishly treated his stories about Australian prime ministers, poets and cricket captains as attempts at making conversation, I truly appreciated his other efforts to make me less stand out as an ignorant foreigner: he had taken it upon himself to teach me how to write. I had always been interested in writing in German, but most of the English I knew I had learned when working as a volunteer with young offenders in the English Midlands. I thought that in order to write a dissertation in English I simply needed to learn the basics of English grammar, increase my vocabulary and then substitute my German words for English ones. 'The prose is satisfactory', Hank wrote to me after reading one of my first attempts at composing an essay, a few months after my arrival. 'But remember that English

is better if it's simple, direct (active voice) and in short sentences'. That was news to me. Why would anybody trying to be sophisticated prefer a ten-word sentence to one meandering over a couple of pages?

Over the following three years, Hank taught me to think and express myself in English, to reinvent myself and unlearn much of what I knew about writing. He showed me how to be exact and parsimonious with words. He taught me to love creating texts in my second language. It was a thrilling learning experience.

Hank was a patient teacher, but he was unwilling to make allowances for the fact that I was not writing in my native language. As far as he was concerned, I just needed to improve. Two years into my candidature, he was still chiding me: 'Your prose is satisfactory, and some paragraphs are good, but keep working on achieving a continuous clarity. Use more short sentences. Use short, active-voice verbs. In English, the Anglo-Saxon terms are nearly always preferable to (better than!!!!) the latin'. At the same time, he was concerned that I would despair about the extent to which he corrected my texts:

Do not think that because I make suggested alterations on your prose that you do not write well. I am addicted to altering prose. In fact if this letter were on the screen rather than being fixed instantly on the paper, it would be much changed before it got to you. (And I notice that some of it would greatly benefit.)

I tell my PhD students that the better their prose, the more I may feel compelled to make comments and alternative suggestions. Sometimes I make more corrections on the second draft than I have done on the first – after the student has already incorporated all my previous suggestions. Hank taught me to cherish sentences that are laconic yet laden with meaning, unadorned yet beautiful, with a message that is precise and complex. I can sense him looking over my shoulder when I read the work of a student who is skilful and ambitious as a writer: 'You need to keep pushing her', I hear Hank say; 'there is nearly always room for further improvement'.

Hank did not teach me to mimic his own style of writing. Rather, he encouraged me to identify a way of writing that suited *me* – provided, of course, I respected what he considered to be basic rules regarding precision and economy. I now believe – and keep reminding my own students – that the chance to develop an *individual* style suited to writing a 100,000 word thesis is perhaps the best thing about doing a three-year PhD.

Very soon after my arrival in Australia, Hank began telling me exactly what kind of text he eventually wanted me to write: 'Keep thinking about that balance between tight, engaging narrative, sharp arresting observations tied to the narrative, and broad speculative conclusions. That's what makes good theses

and good books'. Hank always encouraged me to write for audiences other than two or three likeminded scholars and to experiment with non-academic formats. He wanted me to do as he had done as a PhD student: write a good book, which by default would also be a good thesis.

While Hank had definite ideas about the difference between talented and poor researchers and skilful and hapless writers, he did not expect me to emulate his own practice as a historian. A German *Doktorvater* is often trying to reproduce himself through his students. In Australia, too, supervisors sometimes seem to think that the ideal student is a disciple following in their footsteps. Hank would have been far too modest to expect anybody to become his disciple. Yet he felt also sufficiently comfortable about his own work to be able to be tolerant and generous when it came to that of others. While he had no penchant for theorising, he never discouraged me from trying to make sense of my research by reading the work of philosophers and social theorists. Many of his colleagues in Pacific History were virulently anti-theoretical, to the extent that the mere mention of Adorno or Derrida would trigger laments about the demise of the humanities in general and the corruption of the historical discipline in particular. Hank would heap scorn on scholars who resorted to academic jargon because they were poor writers, but he always respected those with original ideas, however complex or theoretically informed.

Unlike Hank, I tended not to trust my stories to be analytical in their own right. I felt the need to add theoretical reflections when he was content to let a descriptive narrative speak for itself. We never argued about this point, as it seemed to be a matter of personal inclination rather than of principle, but I knew that in this respect my writing had little in common with his. In those days, history departments were often split along two fault lines: between empiricists and theorists and between those embracing the first-person singular and those shunning it. With regards to the latter, Hank and I found ourselves on the same side. He wrote:

Do not be reluctant to put yourself and specific occasions in the thesis. I trust I won't get you into trouble with conservative examiners. It is not only that I distrust the pretentiousness of the omniscient style of history in situations like this, but you are obviously a particular observer-fieldworker historian and this has ramifications. You have a specific perspective, specific experiences, and specific interaction with informants denied the reader of archival documents and newspapers.

Referring to an article he had written for the literary magazine *Overland* (and which I had admired when he sent me a draft), he acknowledged that such an approach wouldn't necessarily win me many friends:

You need not go as far as I did in the Tabara article in which my colleagues thought I was either just being funny or I was incompetent. I may have been both a comedian and incompetent, but I was also trying to say something about Tabara and comprehension across cultures.

While Hank did not expect me to have read any of his pre-1985 books or articles, he shared everything he wrote once I had become his student. For him, supervision was no one-way traffic between a teacher and a student. While I was in Papua New Guinea, Hank worked on his book about Australian one-teacher schools. He sent me drafts and seminar papers but also discussed at great lengths the problems he was encountering. 'I am having great trouble getting the Bush Schools book completed', he confided in late 1987.

I have over a hundred pages, but they are not sequential and they are not consistent. Some is anecdote, some is about the generation of Aust literature, some is about teaching Aborigines in desert camps about the glories of the British Empire, and some is detailed history of education among farmers. All the problems have been made by me.

At least I had no money in the stock exchange.

Hank was a private person. But his letters were not only about the issues that had brought us together in the first place: Papua New Guinea and doctoral thesis. He also wrote about his everyday life in Canberra. One of his favourite topics was the change of seasons. 'We had a taste of summer. Again I made a premature switch to shorts', he told me at the end of one November. In another letter, he wrote: 'In March we have more summer – well a few days over thirty degrees. All this strange behaviour of the weather must be the result of French bomb tests, daylight saving which interferes with God's time, or covert socialists in Canberra'.

His lighthearted remarks about the weather or Australia were to help me stay connected. But they also prompted me to reciprocate and explain to somebody in Canberra what it was like living in Raluana. They encouraged me to practise translating my experience long before I started drafting the first chapters of my thesis. I learned about Tolai culture and histories not least by trying to write about them. Hank knew I would. A few weeks after I arrived in Papua New Guinea for my first stint of fieldwork, he gave me this piece of advice:

Write a lot, not to me but self-indulgently. Perhaps self-scarifyingly, because writing is never a sensuous pleasure and rarely an intellectual delight. You must keep writing because when you leave the field much that is now available to you will no longer be accessible. What seems to be insignificant now may become important.

He was well aware of the poverty of the grand ideas I then had about Papua New Guinea, but rather than ridiculing them before I had seen the place for myself, he held out a promise:

Keep writing so that by the time you reach Canberra you will have a store of words and sentences, and not just wandering, wondering speculations. And the exercise of writing will sharpen your eyes and your questions. Keep writing because you may want a record of your first or second or third impressions. It is strange how quickly your responses change so that the exotic becomes ordinary and the inexplicable becomes rational – and other puzzles arise.

Puzzles aplenty arose during my two years in Papua New Guinea, and I tried to make sense of them by writing to Hank about them. I tried to sharpen my eyes and my questions. In his letters, Hank kept reminding me that I needed also to sharpen my prose.

By the time I submitted my thesis in late 1988, I was familiar with the role of the PhD supervisor in the Australian academy. I also knew that Hank was an exception. In fact he was a *Doktorvater* in the literal sense of the term: somebody who was partly responsible for the creation of my dissertation, and somebody with whom I would form a bond that in some respects was reminiscent of that between father and son.

This text taken from *The Boy from Boort: Remembering Hank Nelson*, Edited by Bill Gammage, Brij V. Lal, Gavan Daws, published 2014 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.