

RONALD LEROY OLSON

Retired, 1956

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Ronald Olson remains the number-one teacher of general basic anthropology in America. Into this task he put his most rewarding effort, and for it he is remembered by hundreds of hundreds who encountered him in Wheeler Auditorium.

It is curious how slowly some undertakings germinate, which once they have shaped themselves seem both indispensable and obvious. Anthropology 1 at Berkeley is an example.

Goddard and I were appointed instructors in Anthropology in 1901—primarily to prosecute research in California ethnology, but with a certain amount of teaching expected or at least permitted. I began with a two-hour semester course on American Indians; he followed with one on California Athabascans. As we added courses, they were on special subjects, strangely enough as it would seem now, like mythology or phonetics. Tradition has it that beginning instruction at Harvard consisted largely of washing bones of skeletons excavated in Ohio mounds. Boas' first offerings at Columbia were on American Indian languages and on statistical principles, and a general course in the subject as a whole developed very late at Columbia.

By about 1907 I ventured on such a course at Berkeley—to the extent of Tuesdays - Thursdays for a semester. I did not feel I controlled enough masses of generalized fact to justify more hours. There were fifteen students—Goddard had previously drawn a hundred or more on Athabascans. There was of course no assistant or even reader; and there was no text book. There was nothing that could have been used as such unless it were Tylor's Anthropology of 1881, which had gone out of print.

Slowly, a genuinely basic and rounded course took shape; until about 1910 a dazzling pedagogic personality entered--T. T. Waterman. I continued to supply ballast and coherence to the basic course; he supplied temperament, vividness, stimulation. Soon after we drifted into World War I, Waterman left Berkeley to train for a lieutenancy in the Army. With all junior certificate (AA) requirements off, the number of students free to choose beginning anthropology, and choosing it, doubled and redoubled. It was an omnibus department course; and we--Gifford and I, later Paul Radin, and two mature teaching

fellows, Paul-Louis Faye and Theodore Gray--struggled to contain the tide. With the reimposition of privileged subjects and their stipulated pounds of flesh taking effect in 1920, the tide began to ebb, even on Waterman's return and against his drawing power. Restless by now, he left a second time in 1921.

Lowie came. With him in Berkeley, serious and organized graduate instruction at once began to develop. We soon changed the beginning course from a departmental to an individual basis, Lowie and I taking it over. I carried it more often in the first half of the decade 1921-31, he toward its end; and I mostly preferring to give 1A, he 1B. But it was a load, what with upper division courses, graduate instruction growing, and research; and we were still only a three-man department, with Gifford's primary responsibility being the Museum. It was in the beginning of this same period, in 1923, that my Anthropology appeared--the first book written as a teaching text. Tylor's little 1881 volume had the simplicity and rounding of a text book, but there were no courses then!

It was the development of graduate instruction that in the end was to change the situation all the way down to the freshman level. In the mid-twenties, full-time graduate students began to appear, aiming at a professional career in anthropology: Strong, who had begun in zoology, then Clements from physiology, Julian Steward and Lloyd Warner; of women, Ann Gayton, Isabel Kelly, Inez Adams. Among these earliest ones was Ronald Olson, who had emerged from service with the Marines in World War I with a disability, but in 1921 had entered college at the University of Washington and graduated there four years later at the age of 30. He went on to an M.A. at Seattle in 1926, with a thesis on Northwest Coast Adze, Canoe, and House types, published there. Leslie Spier saw promise in Olson and sent him to Berkeley, where he became a teaching fellow, and took his doctorate in 1929, with dissertation on Clan and Moiety in Native America, published in A.A.E. some years later. This was just before the break of the great depression, and it seemed the beginning of a new era when the two first of the new crop of Berkeley-trained anthropologists, Strong and Olson, in the same spring received positions at the leading U. S. museums, the Field in Chicago and the American in New York, without the customary anxious-seat wait, or filling in with a Research Council fellowship.

Olson spent two years with the American Museum, part of the time in New York and part in Peru, whence he brought back to the United States the first examples of the ultra-Tiahuanacoid style of pottery from Pacheco in Nazca. By 1931 Erna Gunther was angling to return him to Seattle to teach; but Berkeley, older and more affluent, prevailed, and he was appointed Associate Professor.

He was, primarily, to take over Anthropology 1A-1B, in relief of Lowie and myself. After a semester, the enrolment began to go up. It mounted until, with the aid of 1A finally counting for the A.A. science requirement, this half of the course touched close to a thousand students. If subsequently it averaged somewhat less, this was because the 1A attendance was split into a repeat in the second semester.

The distribution of the general introductory course into three parts, labeled 1 and 2A-2B, came relatively late, about when Harvard also went three-way. Harvard has since gone back to the original two-semester plan; Berkeley continues with three. It does seem that the foundation of the basic course could be laid within a University year; most other subjects do so. Yet it remains arguable just what topics are best included in each semester half. Olson at times expressed a slight personal preference for the natural science half (or third)--which had also been mine, whereas Lowie's was 1B--but he gave the parts with equal effectiveness.

Olson's view in teaching was broad, and his perspective and weighting within the basic course were outstanding. He put first things first, and into relation with what lay beyond. Specific facts he presented vividly, and always with conciseness and pertinence. His course was not easy, but it was never needlessly stiff, and throughout it was interesting as well as proportioned. Its organization was skillful and thorough without obtrusiveness. Add a voice that rolled without strain, geniality and touches of humor, and I do not believe that Olson's delivery had its equal in the colleges of the country. He laid as solid and vivid foundation for major and even graduate teaching of anthropology as was humanly possible.

Among what we call upper division courses, and most other institutions major or advanced courses, Olson soon took over Society from Lowie for whom repetition had somewhat staled it, and it remained one of Olson's stand-bys, though as the department staff grew, there was more shuffling and resuming of courses. Lowie's drift, by the way, in undergraduate teaching was from the topical to the geographical frame: he gave up Religion as well as Society for an expanding World Ethnography. From me Olson took over Mexico as well as Peru--which I had always liked doing, but both culture history (Outlines of Culture Growth) and Primitive Art (really primitive plus) seemed more specifically identified with me and I retained them to the end of my active service. In Mexico as well as Peru I tended to jam my presentation with too many facts. Olson jettisoned the excess ballast, and both courses became much more interesting and deservedly popular.

In graduate teaching Olson centered on the area in which he had begun his professional work, the Northwest Coast, and its trans-Pacific relations. His influence was perhaps strongest on Frank Essene, less direct on Philip Drucker, who mainly preceded Olson's graduate seminars.

Olson's research publications are marked by order and balance, by range and pertinence without excessive itemized overloading, and above all by solid good sense. Most voluminous are his Northwest Coast descriptive ethnographic presentations--on the Quinault (1936), Haida (1940), Owikeno (1954), Bella Bella (1954). In 1956 he contributed "Channeling of Character in Tlingit Society" to the third revised edition of Haring's Personal Character and Cultural Milieu. He has two contributions in the present series (in K.A.S. Papers 1 and 8-9): one

on Kwakiutl, the other on a recent messianic cult in Japan. Olson's most ambitious interpretative monograph, Clan and Moiety in Native America (1933), has not met with general acceptance—he himself admits he may have pushed his thesis somewhat too far—but it represents a legitimate point of view and I have never regretted authorizing its publication. A more special point in culture history, on the possible origin of Northwest weaving (1929), seems to have been widely approved. Olson's archaeological survey in Peru led to no professional reports, and his intensive digging in island and mainland Chumash sites in 1927 and 1928 is represented by only a preliminary paper, which however carries disproportionate weight because of the rigor of its stratigraphy and broadly summarized statistical documentation.

Olson has left his professional mark, but his greatest impress is on the minds and personalities of the thousands of students whom he taught anthropology in Berkeley for twenty-five years.