

Walker Connor (1926–2017): a tribute[†]

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Walker Connor was born in 1926, and was contemporaneous with my own father, so not surprisingly he was a father figure to me. Unlike my own father Walker made it past 90. Those of us privileged to have been Walker’s friend will miss his mischievous humor and twinkling eyes, and his fondness for combining rich conversation with craft beers. Indeed his son Dan told me Walker deliberately had a beer a couple of days before he died. All will be pleased to know that he remained possessed of his faculties and character to the end. He is survived by his two sons Peter and Dan Connor, and their partners; by his daughter, Professor Joan Connor of Athens, Ohio, who has inherited her parents’ writings skills; and by Joan’s son, Nils Walker (Kerry) Wessell, who is with us today.

As to Walker’s humor I will confine myself to two anecdotes. There is an academic conference in New York, and lots of academics are jammed in an elevator. Sound familiar? Walker Connor is crushed beside Benedict Anderson, who has a badge on him which says, “Ben Anderson, Cornell.” Walker Connor asks, “Are you Benedict Anderson?” Yes, the scholar of the famous book replies. Well, “Imagine that!” says Walker Connor. I do not need to explain that joke to this audience. The other tale comes from one Walker told me from Soviet times. A Frenchman, an Englishwoman, and a Russian man are looking at a painting of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. The Frenchman says, “They must be French, they’re naked and they’re eating fruit.” The Englishwoman says, “Clearly, they’re English; observe how politely the man is offering the woman the fruit.” The Russian notes, however, that, “Of course they are Russian. They have nothing to wear; nothing to eat – except a rotten apple; and they think they are in paradise.” Walker warned us to tune in to ethnic jokes, to look to mass collective sentiments, and to avoid taking our class, the professoriate, as useful clues to national sentiments.

It’s important to recognize that Walker thought of himself as of Irish stock, and the son of Dan and Mary Connor was exactly that. Though he would have said the perception was more important than the fact, the perception was objectively true: his Scottish sounding first-name was just his mother’s surname. There is also objective evidence of Ireland’s importance to him. If one adds up the entries in the index to his book *Ethnonationalism* that refer to either Ireland or Northern Ireland they outnumber all other named places in his articles – that may surprise some people. Walker knew from the inside the distinction

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[†]This and the papers that follow are texts delivered at a panel, “The Contribution of Waker Connor to the Study of Nationalism,” at the annual convention of the Association for the Study of Nationalism at Columbia University on 6 May 2017.

between being a citizen and being a member of an ethnic group – and the importance of being assumed to be a member of an ethnic group whether one wanted to be so defined or not.

He was born in South Hadley, Massachusetts, two hours from Boston – Ireland's overseas unincorporated capital. South Hadley is just south of Vermont, and situated amid the heartland of liberal arts colleges in the North-East. Though Walker Connor himself was not of professorial stock he would join the professoriate after graduating from University of Massachusetts, Amherst and Georgetown, and would spend much of his career in this corridor, close to his place of birth: starting at Nasson College (Springvale, ME), and going through Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, SUNY-Brockport, and Trinity College, Hartford, before Middlebury College. War was equally formative in Walker's life. His higher education became available to him because of the GI Bill. He volunteered for service in World War II in 1944 – in the same year that my father joined the RAF on the other side of the Atlantic. Walker served in the army in the south Pacific against Japanese forces, and had many vivid recollections of US patriots (enlisted men like himself) of different ethnic origins, and vivid recollections and tales of wartime combat. It is also important to recognize that Walker's closest partner was his wife, Mary Lyon, a Vermonter, of English extraction. Mary was a teacher, which made her mobile. She was not only Walker's editor and critic but skilled in grantsmanship, forever writing the next successful grant or fellowship application that would take the pair of them all over the world. Without Mary there would not have been extended visiting positions and fellowships at Oxford, Cambridge, LSE, the Central European University, and the Institute of Political Science at Warsaw – it was from Walker that I first learned of the failure of Poland's five-year plan to produce enough toilet paper for the requirements of its people. Mary also wrote the applications that took them to numerous prestigious locations in the US. They kept their home in Belmont, Vermont, near her homestead. It is a wonderful farmhouse, amid the ever encroaching forest, still at the end of an unsurfaced road. Walker was, perhaps unexpectedly to some, one of the most uxorious of men. He proved to be a care-giver extraordinaire after Mary had an unfortunate accident that deprived her of her short-term memory. Even his son Dan was surprised at the unexpected reversal in roles. Our gruff comic had a heart of gold. I last spoke with Walker when he was aged about 89, and he declared emphatically that he was advising me not to get old. The expression with which this statement was delivered was somewhere between a grave edict, an opening interrogative, and a joke. Walker had the brilliant ability to say something simple, and clearly, and yet leave you wondering whether he really meant it. I would like to follow his advice, and I will do my very best not to get any older, but immortality was not within his gift.

On nationalism, the subject of this annual conference, Walker Connor did mean what he said, though he was frequently misunderstood. The fault did not lie in his writing – clear beyond compare. As well as the sustained producer of top-quality peer-reviewed articles, he was the author of two superb books, *The National Question in Marxist-Leninist Strategy and Practice*, and *Ethno-nationalism: The Quest for Understanding*, both of which will long outlive him as memorials to his acute and sensitive intelligence (Connor 1984, 1994). No student should be allowed to enter this thicket without reading *Ethnonationalism*, a collection of his papers (previously published in premier refereed journals) that conveys his marvelous acuity, and powers of synthesis and exposition. Walker may be wrongly footnoted just as a scourge of Karl Deutsch's erroneous theory of nationalism (Connor 1972). In fact in skewering Deutsch's over-rated work he did the profession of political science a favor: demonstrating that this particular emperor was naked: nation-building also entailed nation-destruction. His work also cast doubt on the work of Ernest Haas and the neo-

functionalists who dominated early research on the European Union. As I wrote in his Festschrift, “Walker Connor has never been a dedicated follower of fashion, in his thought, his life, or indeed his clothing” (O’Leary 2002, 153)

Walker Connor was never fashionable, but the fashionable of our times have wrongly categorized him as a primordialist – lazily so. The mistake is especially common among those looking for an unpaginated reference to decorate a slack thought. It is so odd that we now have an era of facile hyper-constructivism in academia. It scarcely fits the feverish homeland politics and xenophobia thriving in many of the capitalist democracies. To argue that ethnicity has an essence, namely the conviction among its members that the group in question shares common ancestry, is not to claim that such convictions are permanent, immemorial, unchanged since the Stone Age, or that groups never merge or disappear, or that there is never acculturation or inter-culturalism. It is not to claim that such convictions are admirable. It is also, importantly, not to claim that all such convictions are true, that is capable of being proved by DNA evidence, but the latter is more common than hyper-constructivists suppose.

Connor rightly shared the impatience of those who are instructed in writing or in seminar rooms that nations and ethnic groups are social constructions; “Who knew?” was his correct response. He never replied to critics, with one notable exception, when he vigorously responded to Anthony Smith, who also died recently, for misrepresenting his position (Connor 2004). He nicely called his piece, with full provocative intent, “the timelessness of nations.” No: this was not an affirmation of primordialism. Rather, it was an affirmation that the historical question of when nations came-to-be is of less import than the recognition that nationalists regard their own nations as timeless – though that claim may need to be qualified by the fact that many nationalists fear the extinction of their nation: nations are perceived as both timeless and potentially mortal.

Connor’s scholarly dissection of Marxism-Leninism and nationalism in my view will be the lasting monument to his intellectual brilliance: in *The National Question in Marxist-Leninist Strategy and Practice*, he argues a case, whereas in most of his articles he crushed bad theories, and quite rightly scolded terminological and conceptual sloppiness. The text should be read and re-read, especially by scholars from post-Communist countries, and not just to show them that not all western scholarship of that time was worthless. The book was published in 1984, i.e. it was written before the Soviet Union had collapsed, and before it showed any significant signs of self-implosion. He set out to complete his examination of how believers in one of the world’s major ideologies, cosmopolitan in principle, sought to manage national questions. He concluded, in effect, that they would be defeated by these questions. In my view, *The National Question* still remains the best work on the comparative Communism of national and ethnic management, with appropriate acknowledgements to Mark Beissinger, Hélène Carrère d’Encausse, and Henry Hale. The book displays Connor’s literary panache, immense scholarship, and his enduring good judgment. It captured the governing strategies applied to over a billion people, ranging across space and time with a very powerful searchlight. Unlike nearly all Sovietologists, Connor’s analyses, especially of the USSR and Eastern Europe, have been vindicated. Throughout the notes of that fat 1984 book Connor uncovers gold nuggets in intellectual history – for example, he observes that Karl Marx was the first person he could find to have used the expression “national self-determination.” The concept cannot, despite what Elie Kedourie or Isaiah Berlin suggest, be found in either Herder or Fichte – believe me, I know, because I have checked it as best I can. In *The National Question* Connor provides a magnificent and prescient panorama of how Marxist-Leninists sought to manage, control, and manipulate national questions throughout their empire. The chapter entitled “Reinforcement of the

Forms" should be assigned to all graduate students in political science (Connor 1984). To recall, this was at a time when Sovietologists, such as Mary McAuley, were declaring that Lenin and Stalin had solved the national question Anyone who read Walker's book at the time could not have believed the Soviet Union was a permanent fixture, though many did, including the late Ernest Gellner. The book extends beyond the Soviet system to Yugoslavia, Eastern Europe, China, and Indo-China, and bears repeated return readings.

Everyone who has read them knows that Walker's collected essays in *Ethnonationalism* are those of a master stylist, but I also want to commend them as methodological guidance notes for those immersed in the study of particular conflicts. In *Explaining Northern Ireland* John McGarry and I were applied Connorians (McGarry and O'Leary 1995). Following Connor we argued against explanations of the conflict that relied upon tangible markers of ethnic difference, in this case religion; that exaggerated the influence of materialism in human affairs; that favored explanations based on class, improperly analogized from the experience of the US and the rest of the UK; and that assumed increased interaction and integration will necessarily increase the likelihood of harmonious inter-ethnic relations. We also took to heart Connor's injunction to observe the predispositions of the analyst, and tried, as best we could, to apply that injunction to ourselves. It is perhaps not surprising that Walker's methodological protocols worked out so well in this case: he was, after all, an Irishman of the diaspora.

I knew Walker Connor the scholar, the raconteur, the connoisseur of ales, and the walker of the fields of Vermont. I did not experience the full-range of his cultural interests, but his jazz collection and the arts and antiques in the Vermont farmhouse advertised his and Mary's aesthetic complexity to those who cared to look. I was never able, however, to acquire the taste for baseball, let alone fall in love with the Boston Red Sox, proof of Walker's romanticism.

Though Walker was one of the most distinguished political scientists of our times, the recognition that he received in his lifetime, in my view, was insufficient. It might be worth reflecting on why he was not appointed to a named chair in a top department, or why he was not made a member of the American Academy. Nevertheless his writings have enjoyed and will continue to enjoy a readership well beyond narrow disciplinary bailiwicks. He brought élan to his writings and many would surrender their tedious monographs to have published one of his essays. If one reads Connor not only does one learn the past better but I believe one will be less shocked by unfolding events and major turning and tipping points. Just to illustrate: Connor gives us no reason to believe there will be a halt to autonomy or secessionist movements, even in modernized, advanced democracies; and he guides us to expect assimilation and acculturation to work better in immigrant states (such as the US became) than in states where multiple nations claim the relevant territory as their homeland. He offers no reassuring guidance, however, to exponents of conflict-resolution or power-sharing: multi-national federations, he warns, may be control systems under the dominant Staatsvolk. He warns us not to underestimate the emotional power of nationalism; not to have faith in "the contact hypothesis;" not to assume that the absence of overt ethnic strife is evidence of the presence of a single or shared sense of nationhood; and, very practically, to avoid focusing on the capital city (and its intellectuals' assumptions) if one wants to understand a place.

Walker Connor did not complete his last project – on religion and nationalism and popular sovereignty – and I am not sure why, though care-giving for Mary, and the loss of Mary's partnership, have to be parts of the explanation. He aimed to show that ethnicity usually trumps religion in political mobilization when the two sources of allegiance come into conflict. He planned a scholarly assault – and battery – on the positions taken by

Islamists, clash-of-civilization exponents like Samuel Huntington, and some sociologists of religion. Perhaps in his unpublished papers there will be enough to generate a posthumous text. I believe, but cannot confirm, that he did not publish another brilliant paper, captioned the iron law of oligarchy: it demonstrated, early on, not in hindsight, using the EU's own surveys, the extent to which the development of the EU did not enjoy mass support. I wish it had been published: as a salutary warning. Walker was a sentinel for intellectual integrity, but entirely lacking in pretension or pomposity. He did not celebrate popular sentiments; he advised strongly against ignoring them. His own true sentiments, to my mind, were simple. He stood for key universal values, equality, and freedom from oppression being the strongest, while deeply understanding the sentiments of the rooted, the uprooted, and the rootless, and their respective predicaments. It is highly appropriate that his family has commended that any donations people may wish to make in his honor should go to "Doctors Without Borders." Walker Connor knew that there is no god and no gods. It is our collective loss that we do not know what he would have finally said on the gods and ethnic groups, but it would certainly not have been dull. Hail and farewell my friend, fellow Irishman, fellow citizen, fellow professor, and my intellectual father.

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