Memorial Resolution of the Faculty of the University of Wisconsin-Madison
On the Death of Professor Emeritus Alexander Neil Skinner

Professor Alexander Neil Skinner died on March 7th, 2015 at age 93. Professor Skinner, whom we all called Neil, was for much of his career among the world’s foremost experts on the languages of West Africa, especially Hausa and Fulfulde. He taught Hausa, Fulfulde, and Arabic language and literature for 23 years in Wisconsin’s Department of African Languages and Literature, retiring in 1989. Neil was the author of the first-ever English-to-Hausa dictionary (the great George Percival Bargery, who gave him Hausa lessons, had compiled the first dictionary going the other way, Hausa to English). Over the course of his career he published several other dictionaries, a great many scholarly papers and books on West African linguistics and literature, many volumes of important translations, and language teaching materials still used in Africa and in universities around the world today. In addition, having lived a life worthy of at least one memoir, he published two.

Neil’s fame in the Hausa-speaking world is best relayed by anecdote. In 2010, when he was 88 and a stroke had long since robbed him of much of the power of speech, a delegation of 15 government officials from northern Nigeria found their way to the African Studies Program at Wisconsin. On learning that this was Neil Skinner’s home, the head of the delegation inquired whether there was any chance of the group meeting with him. There was. Though getting out of the house was by then hard for him (and for Meg, his wife), Neil came back to campus on a summer’s day, where Nigerian guests lavished him with wonderment and praise. Fifteen government officials insisted on having their pictures taken, one by one, with the great Professor Skinner, who they said was responsible for their learning to read, write, and take pride in the international reach of their own native tongue. “The ability of all of us to read and write Hausa came from the books of Professor Skinner,” said one. In their imaginations the great Professor Skinner had been a mysterious and certainly long-deceased Englishman.

Englishman he was. Neil was born in Hankou, China on November 13th, 1921 to Dr. Alexander Hugh Skinner and Winifred Mary (Beney) Skinner. His parents sent him back to England for schooling. From the Shrewsbury School he was awarded the Styring Fellowship for excellence in Ancient Greek and Latin, allowing him to matriculate in Trinity College Cambridge. There he achieved a First during his first and only year of study. It was – bad luck – 1941 and he was conscripted into the Royal Artillery. Neil was supremely unsuited to military life, or so he said, and it was fortunate that the Colonial Office obtained his file and offered him an out: service instead as a Colonial Office cadet in Sokoto, Northern Nigeria. To Northern Nigeria he went. Neil quickly learned Hausa, then Fulani, and soon was assistant District Officer in Kano. He then was given a plum assignment as private secretary to the Chief Commissioner of the Northern Provinces, Sir John Patterson. Patterson insisted that Neil learn Arabic as well as the fundamentals of Islam, and he did, leading to a two-year posting, 1945-47, in the Aden Protectorate, now south Yemen. In 1947, fed up with the British bureaucracy in Aden, Neil was granted his request to return to Northern Nigeria. During this second stint he served as District Officer in Gombe and Bauche. Gradually during the 1950s Neil slid out of the more administrative side of British colonial rule and into positions that allowed him to work on literacy, languages, newspapers, and book publishing in northern Nigeria.

Very few UW-Madison faculty members in politically attuned departments in the hyper-political and anti-colonial 1960s and 1970s had served long careers in the British Colonial Office. Active agent of imperialism though he had been, Neil functioned well in Madison in these climes because it was always obvious to everyone where his sympathies always had been.

Very few UW-Madison faculty members, full professors no less, ended their own formal academic training with the degree of B.A. Neil, after marrying Philippa (Pip) Goldsmith in 1950, fathering Evelyn Margaret (b. 1951) and Simon Alexander (b. 1953), moving to New Zealand, launching and then abandoning a career in radio broadcasting with NZBC, learning Maori and teaching it at Otago
University, finally picked up what must be called a quick B.A. from the University of London in 1961, just before turning 40. This credential was then the minimal one for an otherwise exceptional person to obtain a teaching position in the United States, which Neil did at UCLA in 1963. The African countries were obtaining their independence, American universities, in a growth period, were noticing, and it seemed wise to some of them to train young Americans in the rudiments of African life and African languages. UCLA was a leader in this movement, as was Wisconsin. Neil came to the UW-Madison’s new Department of African Languages and Literature in 1966 and never left. His first wife and two children had become New Zealanders and also had never left – had never left New Zealand. Neil’s two grandchildren, twins, are Penny Skinner, a solicitor in London, and Harry Skinner, retired from the Royal New Zealand Ballet, is in Law School in Wellington NZ.

Neil married Margaret (Meg) Gardner in 1970. Meg Skinner was a prominent figure for decades in the anti-apartheid movement in Madison, Neil at her side. As Neil aged and suffered good-spiritedly through the indignities of infirmity, Meg cared for him with devotion in their west-side home, at their modest country retreat outside of town, always called the dacha, and eventually in daily visits to Capitol Lakes Terraces, where Neil was tended for the last two years of his life. Neil was a member of the Friends of the Arboretum and the United Nations Association of Madison and maintained a keen interest in global affairs throughout his life. He was a voracious reader always, finishing two to three books a week. Languages came easily to him. He was one of those who couldn’t say for certain how many different ones he knew. “That would depend on the definition and the tense of know, wouldn’t it?” Neil and Meg’s son, Ben Skinner (award-winning author of A Crime so Monstrous: Face-to-Face with Modern-Day Slavery), lives in New York with his wife, Shama, and daughter, Isla Amalean Skinner.

Let him be remembered as an exceptional man of his times.

African Cultural Studies Memorial Resolution Committee