

R. Lauriston Sharp

March 24, 1907 — December 31, 1993

In November 1926, Lauriston Sharp, nineteen years old, published a prize winning essay in the undergraduate *Wisconsin Literary Review*. He wrote: "...perhaps on the whole, the greatest happiness throughout life...is given in...the lasting contentment of the quiet man rather than the stormy passion of him who is susceptible to the emotions." Many who knew Lauri Sharp might agree that he embodied the "quiet man" in his demeanor, not given to displays of "stormy passion". But Lauri's long life, his professional career, service to his discipline, to academe, to his university, to his students, colleagues, family and friends demonstrate that this "quiet man" was also a person of prodigious energy and notable accomplishments.

Born after the turn of the century, son of Professor of Philosophy, Frank Chapman Sharp and Bertha Pittman Sharp, and raised in the university town of Madison, Wisconsin, it is not surprising that Lauri decided to be an academic. However, his choice of anthropology as his discipline is remarkable, for there were few trained professional anthropologists in those days. Not long before his death, Lauri recalled that he may have "been nudged toward anthropology" when he studied *The Iliad* in a Greek course as a junior in high school. He remembered wondering if the "manic" qualities of the ancient Greeks reflected a distinctive attribute of their culture, or whether it was a universal characteristic rooted in human nature. He suggested this question was a precursor of anthropology's subsequent interest in "culture and personality". This same curiosity may also have led Lauri to several summer horseback trips with a number of peers (and later colleagues), traveling through the American Southwest, visiting archaeological sites and the Indians living there. If Lauri was already cultivating the bearing of the "quiet man", it may have concealed not only an underlying curiosity but also, perhaps, an enduring youthful quest for adventure and fascination with the unfamiliar.

After earning a B.A. degree in Philosophy (1929), Lauri spent a year at Wisconsin as a Freshman Dean while he explored his career options. He eventually chose anthropology as his profession and the then little known region of Southeast Asia as his area of special interest. Following an archaeological dig and ethnographic encounters with Berber culture in Algeria, Lauri went to study Southeast Asian ethnology at the University of Vienna with Robert Heine-Geldern, one of the few experts on the region at the time. Completing a Certificate in Anthropology at Vienna in 1932, Lauri entered the Ph.D. Program in Anthropology at Harvard. Senior mentors offered Lauri an extraordinary opportunity—funding for two years of dissertation research (1933-35) on Australian aborigines

(then the prototypic “primitives”). Although his research on the Yir Yoront postponed his plans for Southeast Asia, Lauri was proud to be one of a handful of researchers who had worked with aborigines in an area he characterized as “beyond the settlements” and “empty on the map”.

Except for eighteen months (1945-46) as Deputy Assistant Chief of the State Department’s Southeast Asia Division, Lauri’s personal life and professional career were closely tied to Cornell. He accepted an Instructorship in Anthropology here in 1936, the year before his Ph.D. degree was awarded. Holding the first specifically anthropology appointment at Cornell, Lauri was housed in the Economics Department until 1939 when a separate Sociology and Anthropology Department was established (which he chaired in 1942-45 and 1949-56). Lauri rose through the academic ranks and was Goldwin Smith Professor Emeritus of Anthropology and Asian Studies at the time of his death.

Emeritus Professor Urie Bronfenbrenner (B.A. ‘38) has recalled that he and his close friend John Clausen (B.A. ‘36), subsequently a distinguished Professor of Sociology at Berkeley, were students in the first anthropology course Lauri taught at Cornell. Bronfenbrenner reports that Lauri “brought to life for us a whole new world in his quiet, unassuming way...and changed forever our conceptions of what human beings and the world they lived in not only could be, but actually were”, a view of humanity and of the world that has informed Bronfenbrenner’s subsequent life and career. Professor Robert J. Smith (Ph.D. ‘53) recalls that Lauri’s graduate teaching, “drawing on philosophy, literature and an extraordinary range of anthropological knowledge, dazzled us all with his urbanity and wit.” Professor Paul Doughty (Ph.D. ‘63) also remembers that the graduate students of his generation vied with each other to serve as Lauri’s TAs to perfect their craft as scholars and teachers.

Professor Stanley J. O’Connor, Lauri’s long time colleague, vividly projects yet another image of Lauri in an *Arts College Newsletter* article (Fall 1981). O’Connor describes Lauri as “...a familiar figure crossing the Arts quad... charging through that space at such a clip that the air around him seemed lit with an overflow of energy.” That image evokes another aspect of Lauri’s life and career and adds a dimension that further modulates the tranquil image of the “quiet man”. Lauri was strongly committed not only to expand his discipline and enrich his University but also to have an impact on the lives of people in a rapidly changing world. In the post War era, Lauri and colleagues obtained support from various foundations (Carnegie, Ford, Rockefeller) to enlarge the infrastructure of the university and to address the needs of this changing world. This included a substantial increase in the anthropology faculty and founding a graduate program known as the “Cornell Studies in Culture and Applied Science” that emphasized Lauri’s vision of anthropology as an “applied” as well as a “pure” discipline.

Field research stations were established in the American Southwest and in India, Peru and Thailand. In 1947, Lauri at last realized his dream of research in Southeast Asia, founding the multidisciplinary Cornell-Thailand Project, a pioneering effort gathering baseline data in Bang Chan, a farming village near Bangkok. Lauri was also founder and first Director (1950-60) of Cornell's internationally renowned Southeast Asia Program which served as a model for area programs at Cornell and elsewhere. He took special pride in the number of non-Western scholars in diverse fields who received training and experience through these programs and became productive scholars and teachers in their homelands. He was also concerned that the results of research be made accessible for development programs initiated by local governments. Additionally, Lauri chaired the faculty committee which ushered in Cornell's Center for International Studies.

Lauri's professional career was multifaceted. Besides teaching generations of Cornell undergraduate and graduate students, he held numerous visiting appointments at universities in the U.S. and abroad. He was a founding member of several scholarly organizations, including the Society for Applied Anthropology and the Asia Society, and served on the executive boards of various organizations such as the American Anthropological Association, the Association for Asian Studies (President in 1961-62), and the National Research Council's Pacific Sciences Board. He had experience as a scholar-researcher with the indigenous cultures of four continents, most especially the diverse peoples of Southeast Asia. Several of his publications attained the status of classics, notably *Steel Axes for Stone Age Australians* (1952), *People Without Politics* (1958) and his presidential address to the Association for Asian Studies: *Cultural Continuities and Discontinuities in Southeast Asia* (1962).

On his formal retirement in 1973, Lauri was presented with a two volume festschrift by colleagues, students and friends. One volume (Robert J. Smith, ed. 1974) celebrated Lauri's contributions to studies of cultural change and applied anthropology, the other (G. William Skinner and A. Thomas Kirsch, eds. 1975) honored his contributions to Thai Studies. Even after retirement, Lauri remained active. He attended meetings of the Southeast Asia Program, held office hours, contributed lectures, and supervised courses. Although increasing health problems made field research difficult, he continued to work on his earlier research materials. Thus, the extensive files of the Bang Chan Project have been deposited in the University Archives. Lauri also worked on his field notes from his Yir Yoront research and guided an anthropological linguist in preparing a linguistic sketch and lexicon of this unwritten tongue (Alpher 1991). These materials are also accessible to interested scholars in the Cornell Archives.

Lauri's achievements as scholar, researcher and administrator were recognized in a variety of ways. In addition to the two festschrift volumes, a group of his former Thai students established a Lauriston Sharp Essay Prize in

1967 and a Lauriston Sharp Scholarship Fund to promote social science research in Thailand. The Southeast Asia Program similarly established a Lauriston Sharp Prize awarded annually to an outstanding student completing his or her degree program. In 1989, Lauri received the Bronislaw Malinowski Award from the Society for Applied Anthropology for his lifelong contributions to that field. And, in April 1993, Lauri was honored by the Anthropology Department, the College of Arts and Sciences and the University by having an Anthropology seminar room in McGraw Hall named in his honor (shared with Allan Holmberg). On this occasion, Provost Nesheim cited Lauri's contributions as teacher, scholar and humanitarian to improving the quality of education and the quality of life at Cornell.

Many facets of Lauri's life—scholar-researcher, teacher-advisor, administrator-official—were played out in the public sphere. There was, of course, a private sphere as well, centering on his home and family, his wife, Ruth; children, Alexander (Zander) and Susannah (Suki) Sharp Starnes; grandchildren; and brothers, Malcolm and Eliot. Lauri's public and private lives complemented each other in various ways. Lauri and Ruth Burdick Sharp married in 1936, the year he began teaching at Cornell. This was the first and longest of their joint odysseys. Ruth shared in the overseas research experiences as well as the teaching assignments elsewhere. The children also participated when possible. More than a companion, Ruth's interest and self-acquired knowledge of ceramics made its own contribution to the scholarly work in Southeast Asia. Theirs then was a synergistic relationship at many different levels.

Lauri built their house on Highland Road in 1951 following designs of Cornell's noted architect John Hartell. (Vladimir Nabakov briefly lived there while teaching at Cornell and describes the house in his novel *Pale Fire*.) The living room is furnished with family heirlooms and mementos of the Sharps' Asian experiences. Books and periodicals stacked here and there testify to its residents' voracious reading habits. Visits with a few friends or colleagues and lively cocktail parties were held here. The Sharps often hosted gracious dinner parties. These occasions, simultaneously simple and elegant, brought together colleagues from all over the University, local professionals, distinguished (even princely) visitors, renowned academics from abroad and others. Such gatherings were memorable for their congeniality, urbanity and charm.

Though age brought more infirmities, Lauri maintained his lively interest in scholarship, happenings on campus and world affairs. Problems with his legs and back reduced but did not halt his mobility, and dimming eyesight, which he tried to overcome by various reading aids, limited his reading ability. While colleagues marveled at his indomitable spirit, none of these problems diminished Lauri's enduring curiosity and enthusiasm for life itself.

But, as 1993 drew to a close, our colleague, mentor and friend quietly embarked on another adventure into the unfamiliar and unknown. In farewell we can do no better than echo the words of Dean Fred Kahn in 1972 on the occasion of Lauri's assuming the Goldwin Smith Chair: Lauri Sharp was "a learned diplomat, a cultivated scholar, a remarkable teacher and a great man."

Stanley J. O'Connor, Robert J. Smith, O.W. Wolters, A. Thomas Kirsch