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THE TRADITION OF BENJAMIN NELSON

E. V. Walter

Nelson’s personal influence remains no less important than his intellectual stature. He never wanted a pedestal, but insisted on standing in the midst of us. We all knew him as “Ben.” Our feelings about him continued to mix intimate friendship with the highest respect for the breadth and depth of his learning and for the power of his mind. We took his presence for granted as long as he stayed part of our familiar, everyday experience. Yet, we felt his greatness and knew him as a paradigm for the life of the mind.

He left a large community of friends, students, and readers with lives profoundly touched by his work and his personality. Some of the contributors to this memorial volume—as well as some of its readers—will continue in the direction he marked out, advancing Nelson’s program of inquiry. Others will proceed in their own way—some perhaps in directions he never intended or approved—but grateful for his insights, leads, and stimulation. The creative works of his friends, students, and readers, as well as the expanding energies of the IS CSC testify to his continuing influence over a broad range of interests in sociology, history, philosophy, religion, psychology, and the comparative study of civilizations.

This brief introduction to the memorial volume is called the “tradition of Benjamin Nelson,” and we think he would have been pleased by the allusion to Roman Law—a subject that always interested him deeply. Traditio means the delivery that transmits something of value. For us, this memorial volume represents what the Romans called traditio clavium, “the delivery of keys”: a symbolic kind of transfer by which ownership is passed on. In this case, the keys are both symbol and inheritance: the means to unlock the meanings of societies and civilizations.

This special issue of the Comparative Civilizations Review expresses our sense of Benjamin Nelson’s “objective immortality,” to use Whitehead’s phrase. His intellectual life survives as part of our minds. We treasure his work as he liked to live—in the midst of us.