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Editor's Note

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EDITOR’S NOTE

PARIS CONFERENCE

Those who attended the brilliant Minnesota meeting of the ISCSC, held on the campus of the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, learned while there of an exciting new development.

Next year’s meeting – to be known as The 35th World Congress of the International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations – is set for July 5 through July 8, in Paris.

The major sponsor will be the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes and the co-sponsors will be the University Paris 7 Denis Diderot; UNESCO; the Bibliotheque Nationale de France; the Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales; and the Maison des Sciences de l’Homme.


Given the impressive array of sponsors and scholars of civilization-al study, both French and foreign, already interested in participation, this promises to be one of the most impressive annual meetings ever held.

The deadline for submissions of abstracts is almost here.

STEDMAN B. NOBLE

The members of the International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations were saddened to learn of the death earlier this year of one of our most recognizable members. He was Stedman B. Noble, a resident of Washington and a scholar of the globe. In recognition of his significance to all of us, it was decided by the editors to solicit commentary for this edition of the Editor’s Note from ISCSC members.

Nine of them have written – in alphabetical order – as follows:

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The first time I experienced Stedman Noble in action, I remember thinking ‘here is one scholar who is half human and half bulldog.’ I don’t recall the topic under discussion, but I do remember that whatever it was, Sted had everybody arguing with him over an objection he had voiced—and he was enjoying himself immensely.

Sted did like to argue, and he possessed a profound ability to see
where facts had been ignored or historical events had been interpreted in ways that were often inconsistent. And when he found inconsistencies he wanted to talk them through. He would read something he questioned or disagreed with—a book or an article in a journal—and then I would get a telephone call and he would let me know what was wrong with what he had read or heard at a lecture. Some of his sharpest questions were also directed at things I had written or presented in a paper. I would admit I usually had a better understanding on my part when he finally hung up.

Sted was a man of many surprises. Long before it became acceptable, he was a firm believer in and champion of the view that modern civilizations owed their origins in great part to the seafarers who roamed the globe hundreds and even thousands of years before Columbus. He was a scholar with an interest in a great many fields and with the background to match: physics, economics, religion, history, math, philosophy. Several years ago I had a day on my hands at the end of the ISCSC conference in Rutgers, so Sted and I spent the time in the Art Museum in Newark. I knew that Sted had once had a fine collection of modern art that he had put together when he was studying in London so I let him be my guide. However, we spent most of the day in a special exhibit of folk art—much of it from the Caribbean and much of it built around an amazing synthesis of Christian and African themes and legends, because as it turned out, Sted at some point in his life had become interested in the ways in which these two worlds had been combined in Haiti and Jamaica especially in three dimensional altars and altars-scenes. It was one of the most rewarding days I ever spent in an art gallery. I miss Sted, and think from time to time how great it would be to get a call asking me what I meant when I wrote that...?

Walter Benesch

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Stedman Noble, our amazing autodidact prehistorian, was my friend from our first meeting at the Pomona conference. When describing him to friends, I jokingly said that he had spent his career as a civil engineer, and the day he retired, he moved into the Library of Congress and read everything.

Even if he did no such thing, it almost seemed that he had. His freshness, enthusiasm, and cantankerousness were legendary in the ISCSC.
After years of attending conferences and snarling at the powers that be (he disliked authority), I convinced him that honey is better than vinegar. During his last few conferences, I would periodically whisper in his ear: “Stedman, be nice.” This admonition took. He attended the Alaska conference (after much urging) and not only was he nice, but everybody was nice back. He presented a dazzling paper on cultural diffusionism, a passion of his, claiming that very early man was expertly seagoing and that there were global travelers long before mainstream historians realize.

At the Alaska conference, Stedman was admired, and his very pleased reaction drew people to him. It is difficult to know that he is gone. At the conference in St. Paul, his name came up with wonderful recollections by his colleagues.

I like to imagine that Stedman’s spirit is on the celestial seas, visiting other worlds long before the intergalactic scholars will recognize his voyages. Rest in peace, dear Sted.

Laina Farhat-Holzman

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When I had been a member of ISCSC a very short time (I think this was at the meeting at Wright State University), at another member’s request I gave a paper on the global history of philosophy project with which I had been associated. The genius historian who initiated the project was John C. Plott, so I was just beginning to tell about him and his project when Sted interrupted fiercely with words to this effect, “Who the hell is John C. Plott?”

After I recovered a bit of equilibrium, I anticipated the rest of my paper with a thumbnail sketch of the man and his dream; as I recall, Sted remained restless and vocal during the rest of the session. At a subsequent meeting he asked me to join a panel he was organizing with the “Plott perspective” as my contribution. At that time he confessed that Plott was one of the few historians of philosophy that made sense; Sted particularly liked the treatment of the appendix on the problem of periodization that Plott and younger colleagues put together for the appendix of the second volume.

Then there was the ISCSC conference business session at which he loudly complained to President Wayne Bledsoe and the rest of the membership about the society getting more and more ingrown.
On the basis of his always seeing himself as the designated Devil's Advocate, I nominated him for the Executive Council at our Fairbanks meeting in 2004, after checking to see if he would accept. In his gruff way he showed willingness, even pleasure. I'm sorry he didn't get to serve.

Wallace Gray

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Stedman Noble's brilliant and wide-ranging mind has been an invaluable asset to the ISCSC. He will be missed. He not only worked on a history of the ancient world combining research from many fields, but he was also deeply concerned with methodology and theoretical questions including the philosophy of the historical sciences. Along with ISCSC members Roger Wescott and Gordon Hewes, he was a member of the Language Origin Society.

Sted had a small nest egg, which allowed him, by living simply, to spend his days reading at the Library of Congress, where he found and read the best specialists in numerous fields. Topics he studied included: the spread of cotton; the spread of agricultural techniques; the role of trade and, possibly, seal hunters in spreading knowledge; and the role of iron, horses, and writing in the origin of civilization. Going deeper into the evolution of humans, he explored the steps in the origin of language, and the key role of aesthetics in the evolution of humans. His reading enabled him to find historical patterns that specialists missed. I remember his deep frustration when specialists did not know of each other. His initial response to this fragmentation of knowledge was to write what he called Terse Histories, which in a couple of pages showed the sweep of a deep pattern throughout history. Later he began to write a coherent history that pulled together the specialists, a piece of which is published in the CCR 44 (Spring 2001).

Once I got past his brusque manner, we became friends. I liked his approach. For example, in his essay, "How there came to be mathematics and how it spread," he reviewed B. L. van der Waerden's, Geometry and Algebra in Ancient Civilizations. While he found much of the mathematics in the book too time-consuming to master, nevertheless, by focusing on contacts between civilizations, he was able to answer key questions. Thus, Chinese Han Dynasty mathematicians learned from the Babylonian:
("... they dealt with many of the identical problems and sometimes used the same derivations. ...") The Chinese also learned from the Egyptians ("a papyrus from Cairo and the Chinese book all have the same formula, but the result is incorrect. In this case, contact is likely. Correct mathematics may be reinvented in different parts of the world, but when the same answer is given and it is incorrect, independent derivation is very unlikely.")

As a trained economist, Sted assumed that knowledge spread via trade. He formulated what he called the Meggers-Gamble Law of Mobility: "Any group that survives in an unusually hostile environment is able to do so because it has maintained contacts at considerable distance, permitting it to obtain information and assistance. Such people must be mobile, multilingual and have luxury goods to exchange." As he pointed out, seafaring merchants also fit this law of mobility. Unfortunately for Sted, diffusionist interpretations have been out of favor in American archaeology. Recently, the tide may be turning. *American Antiquity* is publishing the Klar-Jones paper, which finds that the Chumash Indians in Southern California and the Hawaiians used the same word and the same technology for sewn-plank canoes. As new findings supporting diffusion become more acceptable, I will remember Stedman Noble's legacy.

Ross R. Maxwell

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I want to add an unfocused tribute to Stedman Noble, being a relative newcomer to the organization. Stedman attended the three ISCS conferences - in New Jersey, Jamaica, and Alaska - which I attended before the most recent one in St. Paul, Minnesota.

I always found him quite willing to talk about things. A resident of Washington, D.C., he had ties to the Upper Midwest, since his father had been a geologist working in the Black Hills, South Dakota.

Stedman was an independent scholar. He studied civilizations because he was deeply interested in the subject and had his own theories which he wanted to pursue. He made a proposal to me by email that we should collaborate on a certain project. I responded with some interest but we never advanced beyond that discussion.

I do feel a loss for the organization of someone who was passionate in his interests and beliefs, who was argumentative but also good-natured and open to considering various points of view. I feel a sense of
Because of his lame foot, Sted would ride bicycles everywhere he could, notably at the Dublin meeting in 1994, when he could get around town better than the rest of us.

If the phone rang at 10:30 at night, I would answer “Yes Sted?” He would be excited about a new revelation on intercivilizational diffusion, or about something outrageous written by one of the anti-diffusionists. He was passionate about these issues, but calm and philosophical about issues of contemporary budget or ISCSC program or politics that excited the rest of us.

He was a terror in an audience, challenging anyone at any time, even a poor president of a university coming to greet us. He disrupted the 2004 roundtable on mainstream civilizations, challenging the precepts on which the series had been organized. But it was so typical that he would make that kind of challenge.

Taken to task for what others perceived as inappropriate behavior at a meeting, he was always apologetic, promised to do better next time. But, of course, he could not, because for him, like Quigley, important business trumped necessary business. And he never could be patient with ignorance.

All his presentations were memorable for their depth, clarity and humor, often augmented by his baseball cap. His last was particularly funny, and in retrospect sad, commenting on his age, 76, and that he couldn’t remember his name. But the sad part was his feeling that new discoveries on diffusion had shown him what his next project, or set of projects, should be. He was not, of course, destined to carry them out.

He was one of the few real holists, knowledgeable in so many areas.

Matthew Melko

1987: I had just delivered my first presidential address to the members of the ISCSC in a semi-darkened room at Ohio University. The topic was one I was then immersed in: the role that cannibalism as an idea, an image, a symbol, and an ideology played in the formation of
Europe’s conception of the New World. I have never tried to publish that particular lecture but, as it turned out, it was perhaps one of my most successful, certainly one of the most lucrative. Half an hour after it was over, as people were drifting out of the lecture hall, Vytautas Kavolis came up to me with a stranger in tow. The stranger looked a bit disheveled and intellectually intense. In other words, he looked like many of our ISCSC members.

“This is Stedman Noble,” Vytas told me. “He lives in Washington, is an independent scholar, and wants to make a contribution to the Society. He loved your lecture.” Not quite understanding what the word “contribution” actually meant, I smiled at Sted and waited for him to speak. Sted began to ask me a number of specific questions, most of them coming from odd but interesting angles and delivered with a passion that all of us would come to know well. The questions began a dialogue that we continued as the three of us walked out of the building into the mild Ohio summer evening. We walked and talked for another 30 to 40 minutes. At that time Sted did not yet limp, and his walking was easy, part of the fluidity of his mind and of our dialogue.

The conversation went in directions that I no longer remember. At the end of it, Sted told me that he had been looking for a society like the ISCSC for many years, that he felt particularly intrigued and even welcomed by the ideas and approaches behind my lecture and behind my and Vytas’s conversation, and that he would like to make a contribution to the Society. $5,000 a year for three years, he said. He also said that he did not want his gift to affect any possible friendships he might make in the Society or affect his relationships generally with ISCSC members. On behalf of the Society, I accepted his gift. We agreed that it would remain anonymous and that there would be no quid pro quo.

I kept my promise and said nothing about Sted’s gift, which helped the Society through some difficult times economically. I believe, though I am no longer sure, that the only person I eventually told about Sted’s generosity was Wayne Bledsoe, on the day that he assumed the Presidency of the Society. I don’t remember ever telling anyone else, until this moment.

The gift and the circumstances surrounding it, as well as the dialogues both before and after, were all vintage Sted. He never traded on his generosity, never asked for any special treatment, and never compromised in the fierceness of his conversation. Indeed he made his own way in the Society, angering some members, frustrating others, endear-
ing himself to yet other members and, over the years, becoming a main-
stay of our meetings and one of our most lively personalities.

He often proposed initiatives which I tried, sometimes with success
and sometimes not, to deflect or to turn into more appropriate direc-
tions. For instance, once he wanted to challenge all the macrohistorians
of the Society to produce what he called “12-minute Universal
Histories” — without footnotes and without references — and to have
those histories published in the Comparative Civilizations Review. That
would really show where people stood, he said, and what they thought
was really important. It was a project worthy of the universalizing
ambition of an Arthur Iberall, and so it amused me to see how, in meet-
ing after meeting, Sted and Art would go at each other. Or, rather, Sted
would first go after Art, for Art generally held himself aloof from argu-
ing with “mere historians.” The “12-minute Universal Histories” idea
never did make it into the CCR, but it did enhance a meeting or two of
the Society.

From the late 1980s to the mid 1990s, when I consulted for the
National Endowment for the Humanities, I made sure to reserve an
afternoon and evening for Sted during my trips to Washington. And so
I got to know his various haunts through his eyes, his beloved Library
of Congress, his apartment, and the streets of his neighborhood. For
years, either during those visits or sometimes during hour-long phone
calls to my home in Illinois, he would talk with an unquenchable pas-
sion about his current obsession. On more than one occasion the talk
was about “camels.” Several times he also spoke with me about the aes-
thetics of prehistoric tools, insisting how everyone else got “the origin
of thought” all wrong. His information was detailed and extensive
always, the result of insatiable reading. He came at things from origin-
 nal angles, and in this way, too, he was a typical ISCSC member.

His erudition was enormous, but it was also the learning of the self-
taught, and so it had some surprising gaps in it which a conventional
graduate school education in the humanities and history at a top univer-
sity would have filled in. Since I had that conventional education, and
since my many years as a teacher of large survey courses in the history
of western literature and thought had forced me to fill in many other
gaps in my own education, I sometimes pointed out to Sted the prob-
lems that, from my own vantage point, some of his generalizations con-
tained. My arguments and comments angered him at first and he usu-
ally dismissed my suggestions, but he came to tolerate them rather well,
I believe, for he continued always to engage me in dialogue. I always
Joseph Drew

looked forward to seeing him at our annual meetings. In fact, usually, he was one of the first people I sought out. "What are you working on?" I would ask him. That generally gave us our subject for the next couple of days.

The $15,000 gift to the Society was a public but anonymous gift. There is a private one that I treasure. On one of my visits to Washington, while we were standing in his apartment, he suddenly took down a volume from his bookshelves. "I want to give this to you," he said, "but on two conditions which you must agree to." "What are they?" I asked him. "First, you must allow me to place a stamp on the inside front cover which says 'From the Library of Dora Shapley Van Wijk, Ph.D.' And you must never sell it." I agreed to both conditions. So, now, the massive *Harper's Latin Dictionary*, based on E.A. Andrews' work and extensively revised by Lewis and Short (1879 and 1907), sits on my bookshelf in my study on the top floor of the University of Illinois Library. I consult it often. I consulted it today.


Michael Palencia-Roth

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Stedman Noble was never afraid to speak out. As a result, he often appeared to be antisocial, but I noticed that he attended the ISCSC meetings diligently. Even though he didn't seem to outright enjoy our company always, he did make valuable contributions every time he spoke or wrote. Moreover, he was invariably kind to all of us, including me, and I give him credit for this kindness. Finally, he gave the organization the ability to project a nice image of tolerance: he showed that we could handle widely varied views and personalities.

In sum, he was colorful, very bright, and wide-ranging in his thought – a wonderful presence at our meetings. I will miss him as a colleague at our forthcoming ISCSC sessions and I will miss his writings and observations.

Midori Yamanouchi

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As editor, I received many calls and communications from Sted Noble over the past decade or so. We both were Washingtonians, and my day job for several years was in his neighborhood, so we were only
a walk or a local phone call away from each other. He would gener-ally inquire as to whether the CCR would accept a certain new thesis or approach as an article. Could he write something in an unusual way? What if he wanted to oppose a prominent thinker that everyone thought was the definitive word on antiquity or diffusion or linguistic research? What if he wanted to say that most people who had looked at it didn’t understand all the ramifications and probably had it totally backward – not east to west but west to east, or not via this path but rather along that way?

To all these inquiries, I would answer in the affirmative. We would indeed welcome articles using atypical perspectives that challenge the discipline. The trouble was that Sted would thereupon express his great pleasure that CCR would consider such a piece, he’d be very happy about it all, and then he would move on to his next interesting idea. When asked at an annual meeting what was up with the article he had discussed five or so topics back, he would respond, “Oh, I am working on that.” And then, not content to let well enough alone, he’d add – “but would the journal be interested in a refutation of the famous line taken by so-and-so?”

Wherever he is now, I know that he is formulating a very good attack on lots of the received wisdom, both here and there.

We all miss Sted Noble and thank him for his wonderful and vigorous contribution to the comparative study of civilizations.

Joseph Drew