

Obituary

Nécrologie

Michael Ames

by Stephen Inglis

Michael Ames was a University of British Columbia-based anthropologist, South Asianist and museum director who devoted his life to teaching and advising students.

Michael was born on June 19, 1933 in Vancouver. He died there on February 20, 2006. Michael received a B.A. in anthropology from the University of British Columbia in 1956, and based on fieldwork in Sri Lanka, he earned his PhD in social anthropology from Harvard University in 1961. He did post-doctoral work in the University of Chicago's vital South Asian Studies milieu.

Michael was an assistant professor of sociology at McMaster University from 1962 to 1964. He was hired by UBC as assistant professor of anthropology in 1964, becoming full professor in 1970. From 1974 to 1997, he was director of the Museum of Anthropology at UBC, but he retained a formal association with the museum until 2004. He was director of the Shastri Indo-Canadian Institute from 1974-1976. Michael was a key figure in South Asian Studies in Canada throughout his career.

In 1979 Michael was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society, was made a member of the Order of Canada in 1998, and became a Fellow of the Society for Applied Anthropology in 1996.

In remembering Michael, much has already been said and written about his long and remarkable contributions to museum studies. This gives me an opportunity to focus on his role as professor of anthropology. Indeed, the students who encountered Michael during his first teaching decade at UBC would never have imagined him as having much to do with a museum, given he was such a part of the strong kinship and religion-focused faculty that the Anthropology-Sociology Depart-

ment was at the time. He warned many "perfectly good anthropology undergraduates" of the dangers of trailing off into the side roads of material culture studies. Michael's later work at the museum and his role in formulating prevailing practice might have seemed contrary to the direction he gave his first students.

In reality, however, his work always remained centered in relations among people, rather than in objects themselves. Michael was always asking questions. In his *Cannibal Tours and Glass Boxes: The Anthropology of Museums* he questioned the role of the anthropologist in the museum, and even the role of the museum in today's world. He clearly answered his own question with his insistence that the museum is a place of negotiation rather than simply a repository; an area of transaction rather than just representation; a site of cultural regeneration, not just a place for preserving the past. He asked that his museology students do the same. Ultimately, Michael probably did as much to revive and legitimize museum-based research as any Canadian anthropologist of his era.

Michael managed his graduate students, a task that can't have been easy. Whether or not they were linked with the museum, Michael regularly sent these would-be anthropologists off to other parts of the world, especially India where he had done most of his own fieldwork. Ensuring they'd come back was particularly challenging. In those days, excuses for lengthy fieldwork weren't so much "the dog ate my thesis chapter," but instead, "I want to go to the Island for a few years to raise goats. How do I make sure I get back into the program?" It took exceptional organizational skills to keep track of what often must have seemed a motley crew. When Michael retired, he sent me a thick manila

envelope containing my letters to him from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, with a carbon copy of his reply stapled to each. It documents support, encouragement, and patience, but not *too* much patience. Through it all, some of Michael's students found that just beneath that crusty exterior lay a crusty interior. Others found a professor who genuinely enjoyed spending time with them; one who was invited to class parties, came and stayed.

Likely, each of us will eventually ask ourselves how we can pass on to the next generation the value of our knowledge and that of the organizations to which we belong. Michael did this through his students and associates—a broad range of undergraduates, graduates, museum colleagues, art-

ists, and community members. While everyone experienced Michael in his or her own way, I imagine I speak for others when I mention in closing what I perceive to be one special gift. When one went to talk with Michael about an idea, one usually walked out with the idea, sometimes a little tattered but, intact. He never appropriated the idea, or dispersed it into an irretrievable universe of larger ideas. Rather, he sat with that big frame wrapped around a chair, listened, thought and commented. More often than not one left in some way chagrined, but just as likely, inspired, determined and ready to move forward.

Michael Ames was a great teacher, a rare teacher and a serious anthropologist.