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A LETTER FROM ROGER

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Before emails insinuated themselves into our daily lives, there were letters. These were actual pieces of paper – typed if they were official, usually hand-written if composed by friends. It was a mark of an abiding friendship for letters to continue until the available space was filled up. I have scores of letters from Roger that fill two sides of an A4 sheet of University of Auckland-headed paper, or the whole of a blue aerogramme. In the 1970s when our correspondence began, his handwriting was small, sloping and economical. There was a great deal of information and unique observation in every letter; so I have never felt inclined to discard them.

To show you what I mean, here are some extracts from a letter Roger wrote soon after he had visited me in Oxford in 1980 (I was there on a Rhodes Visiting Fellowship):

“Thurs – 19 June 1980

Dear Helen,

I see from the date it is a month since I left your front gate—my, time does fly by quickly, and I have been busy as you may imagine. Three weeks away amounted to 3 feet of mail on my desk on return—the penalty one pays. Still it was a super holiday and I have much to thank you for it being so—I really did enjoy the visit and relaxed atmosphere and the opportunity to enjoy Oxbridge at a leisurely pace. One internalizes more that way I think—not such a confused blur. I can’t stop talking or remembering that lovely dinner either—one of the best meals of my lifetime.”

Roger was referring to our meal at Raymond Blanc’s famous award-winning restaurant in Summertown, Oxford, called Les Quat’ Saisons. I can remember eating quails’ eggs for entrée, and having the best red wine I had ever tasted. The tables were covered with red and white checked cloths. It was a memorable meal for both of us.

Roger’s letter then went on to describe his visit to family and friends in America. This included a stay with his youngest sister Ellen and her husband in Flagstaff, Arizona:

“Stan and Ellen have built themselves an absolutely lovely home in the hills around Flagstaff and I went off for long walks through the ponderosa-yellow pine-forest. Haven’t done that for years. All in all the visit made me very aware of how much I like the Southwest—if I couldn’t have a Pacific Island—then that is my alternative.”

The next topic was a report on the New Zealand Archaeological Association conference held in Palmerston North. Roger returned to the Department to become

“deeply involved in marking Term I work, Nigel’s thesis, etc and Department paper work. The amount of paper that flows over my desk sometimes amazes even me—the amount of it that sticks around is threatening to inundate me. Still I have done 50 odd of my 75 lectures for this year—so my teaching load from here on out is much reduced. Hopefully I can get some manuscripts written.”

He then mentioned visitors and new appointments at Auckland:

“Marshall Sahlins is here this week and I had a very good talk with him on Hawaii and its interpretation. He is really going to turn Hawaiian and Fijian ethnography on its head from study of ethnohistoric sources etc and structural approach. His paper for seminar today is ‘Raw Women, Cooked Men and other ‘Great Things’ of Fiji’. He is like a Levi-Strauss let loose in the Pacific. I am going to find him a hard act to follow at the University of Hawaii.”

Roger was due to spend time in Hawai’i in 1981. I was able to visit him there on my way back from Oxford. The stopover included driving to the top of Mauna Kea to see the adze quarries. Roger was one of the few other Pacific prehistorians who found stone tools exciting; so many of our letters dealt with these matters. He finished this letter by telling me about a new course at Auckland:

“We plan to offer a new paper... at Stage III—Problems in Australian and New Zealand prehistory—if so it seems like Harry will do Australia part—and in N.Z. I will tackle alternative classification of New Zealand adzes in which your, Stuart Park’s and my approaches will all be worked on.”

The letter concluded “may I say thanks for such a lovely time in Oxford—and such good conversation, friendship etc.—love, Roger”. The feelings were reciprocated. Roger was an enthusiast, had a vast store of knowledge to work into conversations, and many interests in common.

Phone calls and emails eventually took over as our main means of communication over the last decade. But they are not the same as the hand-written letters and notes that can tell us how it was in those pre-digital days. Roger’s

letters (I am sure he would be delighted to know) are the raw material of our own culture history. We should take care to preserve them.