



Noel Quinton King. 9 Dec 1922, Taxila, British India—
1 Feb 2009, Corralitos, California

Noel King's standard question on meeting a new person was the rather disconcerting, "Who are your people?"

Noel's people were Anglo Indians. He was born in Taxila in British India in 1922—Noel because he was born at Christmas time, and Quinton to indicate that he was Mary and William King's fifth son.

His father was an Engineer of the Posts and Telegraphs dept whose postings ranged over the whole of Northern pre-Partition India. Like his brothers, Noel was sent at an early age to Bishop Cotton's boarding school in Simla, the British government's summer capital up in the foothills of the Himalayas. He would return in the holidays to places such as St. Thomas' Mount in Madras or Dehra Ishmail Khan on the banks of the Indus, which he always regarded as his spiritual home. He grew up virtually bilingual in English and Hindustani, the *lingua franca* of the British Raj.

Mary King was a devout Christian whose life was spent caring for her sons and husband and in service to her (largely Muslim) neighbors, helping the womenfolk find medical care in a dauntingly male world.

When he was 13, his father took slightly early retirement and, in search of a cure for Mary's chronic rheumatoid arthritis, left India for Britain. The Kings set up in Otley in Yorkshire where Noel's bother Charles had taken a curacy after studying at Cambridge. Two elderly retired missionary ladies took Noel under their wing while he attended King Edward Grammar school and between tutors and school got him up to University Entrance level.

In 1941 he volunteered for the army on a scheme that allowed part time soldiering and part time study. He was accepted by St Peter's Hall under its Master Canon Julian Thornton-Duesbury, a kindly and sympathetic man, to study History. The rest of the week Noel was part of a Senior Training Corps and in June 1943 completed a "militat" two year part-time degree in History.

During this first stint in Oxford he met Evelyn, then a student at what was to become St Anne's College, under a table at a party at Christchurch College (or so the story goes) where Noel had slipped for a gin-fuelled cry, and Evelyn (who had signed the pledge at the age of four) to weep at the debauchery and drunkenness going on overhead. Both assumed the other was crying for the same reason, and fell in love.

He was commissioned into the British army as a Second Lieutenant and was in army uniform when he married Evelyn in 1943. After qualifying as a parachutist and being entitled to wear the coveted red beret of the Parachute Regiment, he spent the rest of the war in the 6th Airborne Division Development Unit analysing enemy air drop methods, devising defences against it, and researching methods of supplying ground troops from the air. Much of the practical work was done using Dakotas over Salisbury Plain in England, with Stonehenge in the distance. Noel was an observer on a resupply drop over Arnhem and was lucky to escape unscathed when a column of heavily laden and unarmed Dakotas was jumped by an ME109.

As the war in Europe drew to a conclusion, Noel was posted to the Indian Army, where the Chakala aerodrome was soon to become Rawalpindi's international airport. In an early (and practical) example of his lifelong interest in bringing his various worlds together, he set about applying techniques of European airborne supply to the Japanese front, desperately trying to work out a non-lethal method of getting indispensable transport mules to the front line of the conflict in Burma. First experiments were none too successful: lamentably often, the menu featured mule stew.

When the atom bombs were dropped, the war ceased abruptly. Noel was present at the ceremony of surrender in Rangoon, but it was the end of soldiering for him (although some of the methodology he and his colleagues devised came in very useful during the 1949 Berlin airlift.) He resumed his studies at Oxford (when issued with his “demob” civilian suit, Noel took a size “Small, portly”) finishing off his degree in history and adding a degree in Theology with a view to ordination.

He graduated with First Class Honours, specialising in Early Church History under that great and good man, Geoffrey Lampe. Being a “colonial” Noel had some difficulty acquiring a sponsoring diocese, but eventually he was taken on by Frank Barry, Bishop of Southwell in Nottinghamshire, following a tea of cucumber sandwiches at the House of Lords. Noel and Evelyn with their two children moved to East Retford on the great North Road where Noel took up the post of Curate. He and his wife wrestled with the joys of small children in a house lacking central heating or running water, while he learned the curate’s trade.

His time as a full time churchman was cut short with the offer of an Assistant Lecturer’s post at Nottingham University, enabling him to read for a PhD. Ends were met (just) by a part-time curacy in the village of Shelford, which provided Noel and his growing family (soon to be four children) with a house, a community and enormous contentment. Noel’s thesis, “Theodosius and the Establishment of Early Christianity” (later published under the title, *There’s Such Divinity Doth Hedge a King*) won him a PhD and much critical acclaim—so much so that at the age of 34 he was offered the post of the first Professor of Theology and Head of Department in the rapidly developing University College of the Gold Coast.

Despite Evelyn’s misgivings, the family sailed by Elder Dempster liner from Liverpool to Takoradi and moved onto the spacious campus at Legon, eight miles from Accra in the Gold Coast (Ghana) which, under Kwame Nkrumah, was blazing a new independent future for Africa. These were heady days. The price of cocoa was high, the university was well endowed and had ambitions to rival—and indeed overtake—the other great West African universities of Fourah Bay in Sierra Leone and Ibaden in Nigeria. Noel soon realised that the old-fashioned Oxford style of a Classics-based, Christianity-focussed, ordination-aimed theological degree was no longer acceptable in modern Africa, and began the changes which eventually found a Religious Studies degree taking its place.

Life in what had been known as “The White Man’s Grave” could be trying. From time to time Noel was smitten by Jobian outbreaks of boils and prickly heat. To keep cool at home, Noel took to wearing a sarong, or basically just a large towel, wrapped around his now-burgeoning waist. This contributed to his reputation for being unconventional (by 1970, the photographer for LIFE magazine found him an excellent and photogenic example of the oddities of the newest campus of the University of California.)

By the sixties, Ghana, unlike many African post-colonial countries, was blessed with a number of first-rate local academics—the social anthropologist Kofi Busia was to become Ghana’s Prime Minister after the final fall of Nkrumah. After eight years of hard but highly successful work, Noel felt it was only right that he should hand over the reins of the Department to the very able Ghanaian Theologian Dr Christian Baeta.

However, instead of moving back to Britain, in 1964 he accepted the post of Professor and Head of Religious Studies at Makerere University in Uganda. Makerere then was the oldest and most respected part of the University of East Africa in a country of diverse religious belief. Noel set to with a will to provide a genuinely inclusive study of religion, hiring Muslims, Sikhs, and Buddhists to lecture on their respective traditions. He encouraged the study of African traditional religion, writing two student-oriented books himself, *Religions of Africa* and *Christian and Muslim in Africa*, and working with Said Hamdun on a translation of Ibn Battuta’s journeys in Africa, which was later published.

Much of Noel’s research was primary, gleaned from actually visiting places and listening to people rather than by just reading about it. He travelled, often with the family, into the Ruwenzori to meet pygmies and down to the coast near Mombasa to learn of the customs of the Swahili. He travelled on the Victoria Lake steamer to

Bukoba to hear about the history of Lutheran Missions and North to Mount Elgon to witness the circumcision ceremonies of the Bugisu people.

By 1966 he was Dean of Arts, working to the Vice Chancellor Dr Yusufu Lule—one of the best VC's Noel had ever worked with, who tragically lost his life in the mindless butchery which was to come—and all seemed set fair. And then Idi Amin made his bloody appearance. At first, Amin was welcomed as a means to get rid of the appallingly corrupt Milton Obote and his clique, but very rapidly the fire became much hotter than the frying pan and it was time to leave.

Alas, Noel's reputation for the radical and unconventional and his lack of a UK track record meant that he was turned down for a succession of professorships in Britain. So it came as some relief when Philip Bell, an American Economist colleague from Makerere days, who was now involved in setting up UCSC along collegiate lines, encouraged him to apply for the post of Vice Provost of Merrill College. He was accepted.

Evelyn, who had assumed they were finally going back to Britain, stoically packed her bags again. A good job she did: despite his British passport, Noel was classified as a Pakistani, and upon arrival they were told that the quota for Pakistan was filled for years to come. However, a remarkably helpful immigration official suggested that the British-born quota still had vacancies, thus enabling Noel to make his triumphant entry to California as an "accompanying spouse."

As a former Oxford man, Noel had some experience of working in a collegiate University and he enjoyed the formative years at the start of Merrill College. As a state school, a University of California could not teach religion as such, although the History of Religion was perfectly acceptable. Very soon Noel had started a department for the History of Religion. But what seemed so promising abruptly unravelled with the sudden onset of sickness and, within a year, death of his wife Evelyn in April 72, aged only 49.

Noel set out into the world, the pilgrimage of a modern-day Ibn Battuta. It took some time, but he eventually returned to Santa Cruz, where he lived for a time in a friend's cabin in the hills above the university, hauling water and bathing in the stream (made into a memorable occasion with long-lasting consequences to his skin when an affectionate strand of poison oak drifted down as he bathed...) His colleagues at UCSC made for an exciting mix, with religion and history blending with such diverse disciplines as anthropology, art history, psychology, philosophy, astronomy, feminist and third world studies, and linguistics.

He wandered about the campus in oversized trousers held up with a length of twine, a well-holed jumper and woolly hat, looking like a cross between Moses and Santa Claus. He was pointed out and occasionally introduced to visiting parents and dignitaries, who were often puzzled by the respect shown what was clearly a hobo, and what is more, one who often reeked of the raw garlic he enjoyed with his bread and cheese.

One of his students during the 1970s was a young woman interested in comparative religion and Jungian psychology. When Laurie had finished her BA and begun a Masters at the Graduate Theological Union in 1977, she and Noel met as friends, and married later that fall. She mended the holes, taught him to make decent coffee, and occasionally convinced him that garlic was antisocial.

A sabbatical long planned by Noel was converted into a honeymoon, and they set off for such romantic hideaways as Port Moresby and the Sepik River, quartered in missionary housing (i.e., unheated, uncooled, and with little or no privacy from curious locals) from Melbourne to Papeete. Laurie was introduced to the joys of a writer's life when she found herself typing Noel's hand-written manuscript on African religion, published as *African Cosmos*, working on the wildest variety of machines found outside of a museum, most of them pre-electric and missing keys.

They returned to Santa Cruz in September of 1978. Noel's second round of the householder's life led to two children with Laurie and a home in the rural Pajaro Valley, south of Santa Cruz. Her parents joined them, and

together they transformed a derelict farm into two acres of prosperous garden and orchard, with Noel's chickens and occasional turkey experiment in the background. Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs, Jains, Taoists, atheists, witches, and every stripe of Christian found their way to the property, to solemnly converse with Noel while he chopped weeds, fed the chickens, played stick-ball with the children, or knocked walnuts down from the tree.

He was as interested in them as a magpie is in shiny objects, and would seize on an exciting example of religious expression with glee, fixing it to his imaginary corkboard with a pin.

In 1991, Noel retired from a much-diminished UCSC, when Religious Studies was no more and the college system had been shorn of its idiosyncratic character. By this time, the family had moved away from the farm and up into the hills above the Pajaro Valley, where chickens were replaced by turkey buzzards and fruit trees by oaks and redwoods. He gardened less but remained active in his academic work, particularly with the Sikh community, and occasionally guest lectured at UCSC and filled in as pastor at St John's Episcopal Church in Capitola. During these years, he often spent several months each year travelling, especially in northern India, where he made a second home among his childhood companions, the Sikhs.

In recent years, particularly after his 2006 stroke and cancer surgery, Noel gave up travel, to spend hours sitting in the sun with friends, many of whom had been students in his earlier life. Noel was always blessed with friends, faithful and imaginative, in all walks of life and corners of the world. His children and grandchildren came often, his wife kept him entertained with her doings in the (to him incomprehensible, and bemusing) world of fiction, and he had a tabby cat who was a constant companion, the wizard's familiar.

Noel slipped gradually away from this life over a period of weeks, with a quiet and uncharacteristic passivity that he had, one supposes, been storing up all his life for that express purpose. Certainly, quiet and passive are not adjectives that come to mind in describing him.

Maddening, yes. Boisterous, rude, unkempt, insatiable, certainly. He was as inquisitive as a bear cub and as gluttonous as Falstaff. He was utterly reliable, utterly exhausting, unbelievably hard-working, and gloriously silly. Noel loved terrible puns and adolescent humor, wept freely at soppy children's books and Victorian sentiment, proudly built teetering sheds and bookshelves out of scrap timber and un-bent nails, had a knack for reducing machinery and clothing to their elemental state, and was a driver so terrifying he proved the existence of guardian angels.

It may be appropriate to end with the sort of inapt quote that Noel himself often dragged forth, this one from *Hamlet*:

“I saw him once; he was a goodly King.”

“He was a man, take him for all in all. I shall not look upon his like again.”

Donations to the Noel Q. King memorial fund at UCSC will be dedicated to the study of the world's religions. Checks may be sent to UCSC Foundation (with Noel's name as the memo) c/o Liz Sandoval, Humanities Dean's office, 1156 High Street, Santa Cruz, CA, 95064.