

Tom Down Under: McKnight's Relationship with the Fifth Continent

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Tom Lee McKnight, who passed away February 16, 2004, was a man who loved life, loved geography, and loved Australia. McKnight became known to tens of thousands of American students through his textbooks on physical geography and North American geography, which passed through many editions (McKnight and Hess 2004, McKnight 2004). His American contributions to geography and geographic education are not part of this survey, which focuses on McKnight's "regional specialty," Australia. Between 1961 and 2003, McKnight made seventeen trips to the Land Down Under, most of them not short visits but rather lengthy stays. His research on and in Australia led to the authorship of six Australian books, a dozen Australian papers, chapters about Australia in four books, and a host of ephemeral writings on Australia.

McKnight was born a Texan, in Dallas, October 8, 1928. His early years were spent in the idyllic setting of a large house in the pleasant inner suburban neighborhood of Munger Park, where he enthusiastically attended the local James W. Fannin Elementary School and the Munger Place Methodist Church. At the age of nine, having been double-promoted three times, McKnight was already attending the J. L. Long Junior High when he was "bit by the travel bug." His mother crowded young Tom, together with his sister Nancy and his aunt, cousin, and maternal grandmother, into a capacious Plymouth sedan and drove them from Dallas to Callander, Ontario, to see the famous Dionne quintuplets (McKnight 2002). Along the way they visited St. Louis, Chicago, Toronto, Niagara Falls, West Point, New York City, Washington, D.C., and Richmond, taking two months to complete the journey. Plans were laid for the following summer of 1939, when the same group traveled 5,000 miles through "The West," visiting Colorado Springs, Rocky Mountain National Park, Yellowstone Park, Salt Lake City, Bryce Canyon, Zion National Park, both rims of the Grand Canyon, the Petrified Forest, and Albuquerque. This was the start of McKnight's love affair with the two great

national parks, Rocky Mountain and Yellowstone, and of his lifelong passion for animals, preferably wild or feral.

The following year, he went with his mother and a cousin to Rocky Mountain National Park to spend the month of June in a rustic cabin, one of the Cascade Cottages that occupied an inholding in Rocky Mountain National Park (RMNP). They returned to this same cabin annually, despite wartime rationing of gasoline, and McKnight spent each teenage summer backpacking and camping, while climbing as many peaks of RMNP as he could. He found summer employment in the park variously at a coffee shop, as a laborer for the Bureau of Reclamation's Big Thompson Project, and as a temporary fire-spotter.

As a student at Southern Methodist University (SMU), the lure of an outdoor life led McKnight to choose a geology degree. In the summer of 1948, the SMU senior class in geology, comprised of eight students, drove from Dallas to Alaska, visiting Fairbanks and carrying out fieldwork in Banff. But McKnight had also discovered at SMU that "there was a field of study called geography" and met his lifelong professional mentor, Edwin J. Foscue, who arranged for the new geology graduate to become a geographer and to receive a teaching assistantship at the University of Colorado in Boulder. McKnight's master's thesis was completed in the near-record time of four quarters, and his thoughts turned to a teaching career. He taught at his *alma mater* for the spring semester of 1951 and attended his first Association of American Geographers (AAG) meeting, held in Chicago. Here McKnight met Glen Trewartha, who soon after accepted the applicant into the University of Wisconsin Ph.D. program.

Two years were spent in Madison, then two years as an instructor in geology/geography at SMU, while completing his Ph.D. dissertation. In 1955, the fresh Dr. McKnight was offered faculty positions at three universities but chose to remain in Texas, at Austin. The following year, however, UCLA offered McKnight a significantly higher salary. In order to take up this position, McKnight took "a geographer's shortcut," traveling from Austin to Los Angeles via Edmonton (McKnight 2002). In September 1956, he began a professional career at UCLA that lasted more than four decades. Beginning as assistant professor in geography, McKnight moved through all the positions in the Geography Department, including department chair from 1978 to 1983.

The travel bug never stopped biting, and in the summer of 1957, his first summer at UCLA, McKnight drove from Los Angeles to Florida and then flew around the Caribbean, an adventure described as “fly now, pay later.” Two years later, a highlight of his drive from Los Angeles to Yellowstone was the sighting of twenty-three bears on a single day. In late 1959, his destination was Ann Arbor; the return drive covered 10,000 miles and took sixty-three days (McKnight 2002).

Always a sports enthusiast—who had, after all, attended SMU on a basketball scholarship and had become a passionate SMU Mustangs fan—McKnight also regularly and frequently played both volleyball and the lesser-known game of handball. This passion for handball, which was a tradition at contemporary AAG meetings, had been awakened by playing at the Dallas Athletic Club, where each male McKnight inherits a life membership (McKnight 2002).

McKnight’s first visit to Australia was a year of sabbatical leave in 1961–62, for which he received a Fulbright research grant and taught for one semester at the University of Adelaide. This became McKnight’s favorite Australian city, since here he made many friends. In Adelaide in 1961, McKnight soon made the acquaintance of Jack Foley, an architect and builder and president of the South Australian Handball Association. This was a friendship that persisted over three generations—Jack Foley, together with his wife Berenice; later, Jack’s son Shane and wife Margaret Foley; and finally, Shane’s son John Foley and wife Amanda.

Three papers also derive from McKnight’s first Australian visit. Although the first dealt with American leisure, and so is indeed not about Australia, it did appear in the *Australian Journal of Planning*, and so is mentioned here (McKnight 1961b). Close geographical observation of the South Australian economy soon led to the first of a series of papers on economic geography topics such as industrial location, development, decentralization, and manufacturing, published in various Australian journals (McKnight 1962a). Back in America after this first visit, McKnight also published a survey of academic geography in Australia in the *Professional Geographer* (McKnight 1962). It is interesting to note that at that time there were ten geography departments in Australia offering classes and one research department; the total geography staff was 60.5 persons, of whom 25 held a doctorate. At the Townsville University College (a branch of the University of Queensland), the sole geographer was a

fellow American and McKnight friend, F. H. “Slim” Bauer, and the present author was a student in his class. When news of Bauer’s death was revealed at the Flagstaff meeting of the Association of Pacific Geographers in 1998, it seemed appropriate to dedicate that year’s issue of *The California Geographer*, then almost ready for press, to the memory of “Slim,” and to ask McKnight, who was a reviewer for the journal, to write a short piece as opener. He agreed with alacrity, and supplied an attractive picture of Bauer to supplement the article (McKnight 1998).

In 1966, McKnight returned to Adelaide and again taught one session at the university there. He also attended his first Institute of Australian Geographers (IAG) meeting, held that year in Sydney. His continued research into industrial and economic geography led to four more papers on aspects of South Australian manufacturing and industrial location. The papers were published in Australian journals (McKnight 1965, 1966, 1967, 1968). A new stage in this omnivorous geographer’s life was developing. Always the wildlife enthusiast, McKnight had in the late 1950s researched and published several articles, both scholarly and popular, about feral burros and wild horses in the western United States (McKnight 1957, 1958, 1959a, 1959b, 1959c, 1960, 1961a), culminating in a monograph on America’s feral livestock (McKnight 1964). Now, in South Australia



A bush picnic, somewhere in the Outback McKnight loved so well.

he had also become interested in the packs of exotic wild camels that roamed the outback, leftovers from a time when they provided a valuable means of transportation of goods across the arid interior. The camel drivers were then referred to as “Afghans,” though many were not in fact from the country of Afghanistan. When a train line was completed in 1929, taking passengers and goods from Port Augusta to Alice Springs along the same route as the camel teams, it was christened “The Ghan,” in memory of the contribution made by these men and their hardy, once-valued animals. In early 2004, a long-awaited extension north was opened, so passengers can now enjoy a luxury air-conditioned transcontinental ride on “The Ghan” from Adelaide to Darwin. McKnight’s research on the wild camels led to the publication of his first Australian book, *The Camel in Australia*, published by Melbourne University Press (McKnight 1969). An amusing anecdote is associated with the distribution of this now classic and hard-to-obtain title. During a trip along hundreds of miles of rough dirt roads in the outback of northern South Australia in 1992, Tom and his wife Joan Clemons rolled one afternoon into the town of Marree (current population 250). After the long, hot, dusty drive, the pub was of course the immediate destination. McKnight ordered two beers, and the publican of course noticed the accent: “You’re a Yank.” Tom admitted to this fact. “I know a Yank, the publican continued. He pulled a book from a tiny shelf behind the bar, where his modest library of four books was kept. It was *The Camel in Australia*. Modestly, Tom admitted that he was that “Yank,” but the outback of Australia is a place renowned for its tall tales, so before the publican would believe this, McKnight was required to show his driver’s license and passport (Clemons pers. comm., Salter 2004).

The camel research led to the wider issue of feral animals in Australia, a problem that continues to plague this once-isolated country, where delicate ecosystems have been devastated by the introduction of exotic creatures (Rolls 1969). McKnight’s paper on barrier fences as a means of control, focusing on the fascinating series of dingo fences, appeared in the *Geographical Review* (McKnight 1969). Two years later, McKnight wrote about Australia’s wild buffalo in the *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* (McKnight 1971). A broader approach to rural Australia suffused the paper McKnight wrote on biotic influences on Australian pastoral land use for the Association of Pacific Coast Geographers (APCG) (McKnight 1970). Back in Los Angeles, McKnight followed this line of research with his next monograph on feral livestock in Australia (McKnight 1976)



McKnight always loved to see “critters,” and none are more lovable than these cute Australian wallabies.

and in a chapter comparing feral hoofed livestock in Australia and the United States (McKnight 1975).

On his third visit to Australia, in 1970, McKnight taught a semester at the University of New England in Armidale, New South Wales. At this time, Prentice-Hall was producing various series of small but scholarly Foundations of Geography books, whose titles and simple covers are familiar to all who studied geography in the 1960s and 1970s. The Foundations of Cultural Geography Series included such geography classics as Amos Rapoport’s *House Form and Culture* (1969) and John Fraser Hart’s *The Look of the Land* (1975). Wilbur Zelinsky’s *Population Geography* (1966) was also part of the Foundations of Economic Geography series. McKnight was invited to produce a book for the World Regional Geography Series, *Australia’s Corner of the World; a Geographical Summation* (McKnight 1970).

The tri-fold brochure printed as advertising material for this book has two amusing features, one intentional by the publishers. The first leaf of the brochure reads “Announcing the first geography of Australia...” This claim could well have offended several living geographers, and certainly seems to ignore several more geographers already dead. James Bonwick, for example, who wrote *Geography*

of *Australia and New Zealand* in the mid-nineteenth century, was just one of a handful of early authors of Australian geographies, and of course in the early twentieth century Griffith Taylor wrote four Australian geographies, while even Cumberland's well-received *geography of Australia, New Zealand and Pacific Islands* was by then fifteen years old (Bonwick 1855; Taylor 1911, 1914, 1923, 1931; Cumberland 1954). The reader opens the second page of the brochure, however, to reveal the key words "by an American." The second amusing feature of the brochure seems to derive from layout problems. Modern Australia has three icons—the misnamed Sydney Opera House, the kangaroo, and the koala. Now McKnight's book appeared in pre-Opera House days, and so the first photograph shows sailing boats at Sydney Heads; but the "cuddly" koala was obligatory for an audience of American readers. Unfortunately the koala had to fit the layout, so his picture was turned sideways, giving a whole new slant to "down under." We can also marvel today that the little McKnight book sold for a mere \$2.50. Yet another oddity associated with the publication of *Australia's Corner* is that the publishers decided to use the name Thomas L. McKnight for the author, despite the fact that Tom was his real and legal given name, as recorded on his birth certificate. Many library catalogues have followed this "naming" and now assume incorrectly that Tom L. McKnight is the abbreviated form.

Although it was to be eight years between McKnight's third and fourth visits to Australia, it remained on his research horizon, leading to the monograph on Australian stock routes, *The Long Paddock*, published in the University of New England Monograph Series (McKnight 1977). The year 1978 saw McKnight in Australia again, this time teaching three months at the Royal Military College (Duntroon) in Canberra and attending the Institute of Australian Geographers (IAG) meeting, held that year in Townsville.

Possibly the shortest of McKnight's Australian sojourns was in 1980, when he visited Adelaide for the Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science (ANZAAS) meeting in that city. McKnight wrote a survey of Australia's changing rural geography for a volume of international examples of rural transformation (McKnight 1980), and was deeply involved in writing his physical geography text. By now he was also deeply involved in geography education. As chair of the Geography Department at UCLA, McKnight introduced the Community College/UCLA Geographic Alliance, an outreach program to community college instructors in



Map of places in Australia visited by Tom McKnight and Joan Clemons (cartographer J. Clemons).

California. From the Southern California Geographic Alliance grew over time the familiar State Geographic Alliances, now funded by the National Geographic Society.

McKnight had also conceived a plan for a UCLA Education Abroad Program in Australia. This led to a “scouting” trip to Australia in early 1984, followed by his seventh and longest sojourn in Australia, an eighteen-month visit with

the program, based in Melbourne, from where he supervised the academic programs of almost fifty UCLA students studying at six Australian universities. This visit culminated in a tour of all Australian states but Tasmania, concluding with island hopping on the return journey, via New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Nauru, Guam, and Honolulu.

The year of 1984 also saw the publication of McKnight’s now-classic undergraduate text on physical geography, now in its eighth edition (McKnight 1984). Written primarily for American students, with much of the cartography done by McKnight’s son Clint, the book was larded with photographs of Australian examples, with the emphasis on the quaint and the remote; the geographic grid was illustrated with a picture of a sign reading “Tropic of Capricorn,” not from the coastal city of Rockhampton but from outside Alice Springs; in fluvial landforms, the dry bed of an ephemeral stream was pictured, of course, from some desolate inland location of Australia.

At a 1987 conference at UCLA on the essence of place, sponsored by the National Geographic Society and organized by Gail Hobbs, McKnight gave an opening paper on Australia (McKnight 1987), but another eight years separated his Australian visits. On all visits mentioned so far, McKnight had been accompanied by his wife Marylee, who passed away in 1986. A few years later, McKnight became affianced to fellow-geographer Joan Clemons, and wanted to show her the country he knew and loved so much. Together they visited Australia nine times in eleven years. First, in 1992 a grand tour of over 10,000 kilometers was undertaken, heading south from Sydney

through New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, up through “the Centre” to Darwin, across to the Gulf of Carpentaria and down the coast of Queensland, and back to Sydney. Much McKnight research on irrigation technology, written in the late 1970s and into the ’80s, has not been discussed in this paper, as it deals with American geography, but in 1992 McKnight wrote on high-technology irrigation in Australia for a book in a series on socioeconomic dimensions of agriculture (McKnight 1992).

In mid-1993, McKnight took partial retirement from UCLA. He and Clemons returned to Australia for a wedding in Adelaide and a honeymoon tour through Western Australia. Early 1995 saw the couple as guest lecturers on a Royal Viking cruise from Fiji to New Zealand, then north around the Queensland coast from Sydney to Darwin; they flew back to Los Angeles via Kakadu, Adelaide, and Sydney. Prentice Hall Publishers were so happy with the success of McKnight’s physical geography text that they allowed him to publish a text for a much smaller group, mostly his students in his UCLA upper-division class on the geography of Oceania (McKnight 1995). In 1996, an extensive tour of Tasmania was followed with another outback adventure on a loop taking in Adelaide, Broken Hill, Tibourra, Thargominda, Windorah, Longreach, Winton, Cloncurry, Mt. Isa, Boulia, Alice Springs, Coober Pedy, Roxby Downs, Port Augusta, and back to Adelaide. Published in that year was a small volume on Australia for the general reader, as part of a series of country-study books in the American Geographical Society’s Around the World Program. Three cheerful koalas huddle on a branch on the cover of this small book (McKnight 1996).

In 1998, McKnight retired from UCLA, becoming an emeritus professor. Failing health did not prevent McKnight and Clemons’ now-annual visits to Australia, but the couple had a tendency to stay in one place for longer periods: in early 1998 one month was spent on Kangaroo Island, and one on the Eyre Peninsula; in 1999 a pleasant month was spent on Queensland’s Sunshine Coast, and another on the Yorke Peninsula (McKnight and Clemons n.d.). The new millennium saw three months on Kangaroo Island and a drive across the Nullarbor Plain from Adelaide to Esperance. McKnight was a special guest at the IAG meeting, held in 2001 in Dunedin, where he became the third—and the first non-Australian—recipient of the IAG Australia-International Medal for “outstanding contributions to the understanding of the geography of Australia by geographers permanently residing outside Australia.” The first two medal recipi-

ents were Janice Monk in 1999 and Reg Golledge in 2000. In 2002, a month at Noosa was followed by a tour of outback New South Wales; in early 2003, McKnight and Clemons spent time on the Fleurieu Peninsula and at Lightning Ridge before making their second safari to Southern Africa. Throughout the 1980s until his passing, McKnight was occupied with revisions, additions, and improvements to the later edition of his two major textbooks; for *Physical Geography* he was joined from the sixth edition on by collaborator Darryl Hess. The fourth edition of *Regional Geography of the United States and Canada* came off the press just prior to his unexpected and untimely death in February 2004 (McKnight 2004).

Tom Lee McKnight loved life, loved geography, loved travel, loved “critters,” and loved Australia (Anon 2004). In forty years of overseas travel, he visited every continent except Antarctica, but none as frequently as Australia. At a celebration of his seventy-fifth birthday in Santa Monica in October 2003, McKnight presented his seventy-five all-time favorite slides; ten of these were from Australia, depicting landscapes and critters, but initially the Australian selection would have comprised fifty percent of the show, except for his wife Joan’s pointing out this imbalance. McKnight was loved by thousands who met him in person, as students or as colleagues at the local, regional, and national geography meetings he never failed to attend; he was admired by tens of thousands who knew him through his influential books. It was McKnight’s wish to have his ashes rest in four places he loved best: at his home of forty-five years in Los Angeles “lower Tilden Avenue”; among the wolves at Yellowstone National Park; at his second home in Estes Park, on the edge of his beloved Rocky Mountain National Park; and finally in Adelaide. His wife, Joan Clemons, traveled to Australia to scatter this last portion of Tom’s ashes just before her own death in November, 2004. (See memorial article in this issue).

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