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THE LONG WALK VI: AN INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT PAINE IN THREE ACTS

Hugh Beach

March, 2001 Robert Paine, and Hugh Beach, two enthusiasts of Saami ethno-politics, reindeer pastoralism and northern studies in general, have ensconced themselves at the latter's home in Stockholm. Their mutual project assignment from the journal *Nomadic Peoples* is to come away with the makings of an interview article featuring Robert, and toward this end the table at which the two white-haired anthropologists sit is strewn with papers and books on herding, and cluttered with cassette tapes, microphone, recorder and a freshly opened bottle of Glenfiddich.

It is evening, and Robert, recently arrived from Tromsø, Norway, and bursting with the latest developments in Norwegian Saami affairs, is flatly disinterested in any mellow career summation. For him this is a glorious opportunity to talk reindeer and Saami affairs. In fact, for the both of them the pleasures of field memories and herding comparisons prove irresistible, but in the back of a mind whose acuity decreases with the Glenfiddich, Hugh knows he must also coax from Robert some basic reflection on the why, how and wherewithal of his pastoral engagement.

Robert Paine

Act I

As the curtain rises, Hugh is fiddling with the recorder, mumbling 'testing, testing', while Robert is off and running.

Robert: They're doing it again! The Norwegian reindeer administration is making the point that Saami competition among herders must be reduced, as it is 'conflict generating' and 'resource destructive.' Whereas Saami pastoralism is based on such competition!

The Norwegians are now dictating that Saami must have this regional board (*områdsstyre*) and are proud that they have handed this decision-making tool to the Saami. Yet these regional boards are framed in Norwegian terms. What we get is herding competitors from different groups placed together in the same board. Next thing you know, the Regional governor (*Fylkesmannen*) criticises the regional board for being composed only of Saami and pushing only the interests of herding Saami while neglecting the interests of other Saami. The governor throws in the enlightened comment that herding is not alone in being the bearer of Saami culture.

Hugh: It's the usual divide and conquer scenario. Swedish Saami policies have been built up on the framework of creating Saami category factions which are then pitted against each other in resource competition. So these national state administrations claim on the one hand to be eliminating allegedly destructive Saami competition between herders, while on the other hand they create and cement competition between factions in another frame – not to mention the skewed competition for land use allowed between Saami interests on the whole and those of extractive industries such as forestry or hydro-electric power dam construction.

Robert: The governor goes on to say that he agrees that pastoralism is too heavily regulated by the state and that the pastoral business should deal with its own internal issues itself. It sounds great, but he then claims this is not so easy with biased interests controlling regional boards. Hence the state should place the upper limit for herd sizes in an area, with other interests (Saami and Norwegian) in mind, such as fishing. In a nutshell, authorities who launch 'models for' regulations of Saami pastoralism sometimes give them some autonomy but then claim they are misusing it, causing internecine conflict and thus necessitating state controls.

Hugh: Let's hear some more about the positive aspects of the competition between Saami herders.

Robert: The first thing is that it is an egalitarian society and therefore there is competition. What is the competition about? Well, I'd say it is about the meaning of life. And so much of that, for these pastoralists, is bound up with reindeer: their

husbandry, and pride in herd composition. Competition is really high in egalitarian societies. However, some people are likely to step over the mark, not to act within the moral consensus. This leads to an internal system of sanctions, and of course, the means of sanctioning is the reindeer. The authorities will look upon such sanctioning reductionistically as mere theft, but only a small part of what we should grasp as 'communication through reindeer' is theft.

Here I've had in mind competition between family herds. *Within* a family, however, care has to be taken to dampen – to render unnecessary – such competition. Here the herd is seen as being passed from generation to generation. Thus already on their marriage, the younger generation will be given (i.e. inherit) a share of the family herd. Among the significant implications of this are: (1) each parental generation is a *custodian* of the herd; (2) through such a process of anticipatory inheritance competition within a family, between its generations and within a generation, is perhaps not eliminated but certainly mediated; and (3) herd size of any one owner changes through time in response to the family's development cycle.

Hugh: Of course there's an obvious problem when Saami traditions of anticipatory inheritance feeding the tendency both to expand herd size and the number of individual herds run into state ideals of controlled herd sizes and aggregate numbers of animals for specific regions, and more so as such controls come to be applied even to individual herds.

Robert: Sure, but rather than the usual bleat about 'tragedy of the commons', one should consider the 'tragedy of pastoralism' which stems from the 'agro-minded' perception of the state based on liberal democracy, equality, and the welfare state. In the situation of pastoralism within the nation state, the state regards fishing and agriculture (also growing industrialism) as the primary activities from which to take the 'models for' regulatory relations which it seeks to apply also to pastoralism. But certainly, we cannot escape the issue of carrying capacity.

What is often not recognized is the unforeseen changing climatic conditions: in particular, sudden icing followed by heavy snowfalls. In short, this can mean reindeer are cut off from their food – the lichens under the snow and ice. So, if three of four pasture season-types are OK, but the fourth is impaired, it causes major harm. But rather than recognise this, the state uses phrases such as 'carrying capacity' of the tundra as if this is a constant entity.

Then again, we all know there is heavy snowfall which affects the relationship between the animals and the pasture, but to what end is this going to be put? As the pastoralists see it, carrying capacity is the relationship of the animal population to the pasture that produces the wished-for productivity – an important variable (among individual pastoralists, but the state doesn't see that). Behnke (2000) puts it well, something like this I think: Within the limits of what is biologically feasible, the correct stocking rate for a grazing system ought to be determined in

relation to the particular production strategy and the particular socio-economic circumstances. Thus there is no single biologically pre-determined optimal equilibrium density.

The goal of Saami herders might not be just to maximise production and profit, but also to produce a 'fine herd,' a large herd, beautifully complex (taking esthetic pride in the blend of different year classes) with good and successful pastoralists in control and making their own decisions.

Hugh: Maybe, but critics could argue that even Behnke still seems to posit some 'limits of what is biologically feasible.' Nevertheless, I think we share experiences from both Norway and Sweden that after pulling the ecological rug out from under a living pastoral system, state intervention applies welfare concern and subsidises herding to some extent. Then the subsidies are invoked to blame Saami interests for promoting a 'hobby livelihood' on the taxpayers' backs. So the victims become conceived as perpetrators. As for the 'tragedy of pastoralism', state regulators can always say, 'OK, but aren't liberal democracy, equality and the welfare state rather noble ideals? If a small minority is going to have a chance at even minimal self-determination, won't it have to find common ground with such majority imperatives?'

Robert: Let's take anticipatory inheritance and the perceived problem of too many reindeer as a case in point. First of all, the Saami herd reindeer in Norway, Sweden, Finland and the Kola Peninsula of Russia, but what I am talking about here relates specifically to Norway, actually Finnmark, Norway's northernmost district. Of 2,822 people engaged in reindeer herding in Norway as a whole in the year 2000, fully 2,120 of them were in Finnmark. Of roughly 159,000 reindeer in all of Norway, 112,000 are in Finnmark. In Finnmark the herding families engage in an annual transhumance (not simply 'nomadism' which carries the idea of them just wandering around) bringing them into contact with settled populations at each end. However, according to the state, a large population of pastoralists in Finnmark should share more reindeer to secure welfare standards, but also according to state calculations, there are already too many animals for the carrying capacity of the grazing lands. The state argues that it must therefore regulate the number of herders with access to deer property and did so by establishing a permit system in the Norwegian Herding Law from 1978.

Hugh: Sweden used the same argument to define herding eligibility criteria for certain Saami and then to limit the ability of that subset actually allowed to *practice* their herding right in the Reindeer Grazing Act of 1928.

Robert: The next step is to enforce annual reindeer counts, and there has been much debate about the need to have enforced reindeer slaughters. The matter has become very inflamed. The reindeer administration wanted to enforce slaughters,

but the politicians in Oslo said no, because this would be offensive to the law regarding the protection of private property. It all resulted in the resignation of a top member of the reindeer administration.

Hugh: The need is to find ways to adapt market strategies to herding realities, to find policies which are both smart for the market and smart for herders – like cutting down herd numbers with the help of 'reindeer accounts' (*renkonto*) or other equivalent taxation policies permitting reindeer wealth to be stored in the bank, untaxed, rather than on the hoof. This way herders are not penalised for slaughtering their animals according to ecological considerations. (cf. Beach 1993).

Robert: When children of a family herd are going to marry, the parents want to transfer reindeer to them. Maybe they do not have enough reindeer to distribute at just that time, but they have 'reindeer/money' in the bank that they can give. The pastoral tradition of anticipatory inheritance need no longer be an ecological liability. There are numerous supposed problems which are as man-made as could be their solutions.

Act II

As the curtain rises, both Hugh and Robert sit quietly looking at each other. The first flush of discourse has subsided, and both realise that the time has come to anchor Robert's further remarks to his personal field chronology.

Hugh: What made you want to go north?

Robert: The hot sweaty, dark continent of Africa left me cold. I had intended to do fieldwork among Inuit in Canada but this would have meant a very large grant, so my supervisor at Oxford, Franz Steiner, said, 'Do a summer's fieldwork in Norway and put together a BLit. thesis, and on that basis we will apply for funding for long-term work among the Inuit.' This was 1951. (Robert was 25.) It was the beginning of 14 years in Norway.

Hugh: So if this was really just an excuse to get you later on over to the Inuit, how prepared were you for the Saami?

Robert: I was very excited and as soon as I got there I forgot all about going to the Inuit and just wanted to go with these herding 'nomads' (although I have since come not to want to refer to them as nomads but as pastoralists).

Hugh: I know you have a full account of your activities in the invited *Ethnos* essay, 'By chance by choice: A personal memoir' (Paine 1998: 1), but perhaps a brief summary here?

Robert: Well, I have lived and worked with the coastal Saami – subjects of my Oxford thesis and two books. But the highlights were ventures with pastoralists: an abortive attempt in 1951 with a Karasjok group; a brief fall migration that year with a Kautokeino group; and then – after intervals on the coast and back in Oxford – six months in 1955 with another Karasjok group. There I struck lucky. I was fortunate enough to latch onto a Saami herding family that had just lost its hired hand, and needed help to repair some fencing and other jobs. I was with them for six months. I learned a lot of Saami from them, although the kids were always trying to mislead me. (On the coast, people wouldn't teach me Saami. They said it did not suit me, an Englishman, so it had to be Norwegian.) I tried to focus all my conversations on reindeer, and if you stick to reindeer you get into kinship, since you feed kinship and keep it alive with reindeer. My questions were mainly linguistic: 'What was that word?' 'What did he say?' not 'Who is your grandmother?' or 'What are you going to do next?' That period ended with my joining Robert Redfield's seminar in Uppsala and then a return once again to Oxford.

By now, I had quite a good idea of what's what when it comes to Saami pastoralism. I was aware that with the Karasjok people there was a kind of 'cowboy' pastoralism compared with the more disciplined pastoralism of Kautokeino, and that is where I eventually got to. In 1961 I joined Aslak Bals and an arrangement was struck between us whereby I would write a book about Saami pastoralism. We would switch between Aslak's Norwegian and my Saami. His Norwegian was better than my Saami, but when in company with other Saami, we would stick to Saami.

Hugh: But who at that time was interested in these pastoralists?

Robert: Not the Scandinavians, with some few exceptions like Vorren and Manker, but they were ethnographers, not social anthropologists: invaluable work nevertheless. (Vorren was very much of a patron for me and he even managed to supply fellowship money.) But where were the Scandinavian anthropologists? They went to exotic places, different far-flung parts across the world. Who saw Scandinavian Saami pastoralists as exotic? Well, the English and Americans, like Bob Pehrson who came to write influentially on cognatic systems and sibling solidarity. He was at Chicago; Ian Whitaker from Cambridge; Ralph Bulmer also from Cambridge who was briefly with Saami pastoralists of Varanger and then went off to New Zealand; and myself from Oxford.

Then, a good many years later the pattern repeats itself: Myrdene Anderson, Hugh Beach and Tim Ingold. We still had to wait for the Norwegians. But now there are several: Terje Brantenberg, Ivar Björklund, Georg Henriksen and others. But from my earliest years there was Harald Eidheim. He did not specifically work on Saami pastoralists, but was very much attuned to Saami issues and political issues; a close colleague and friend.

Hugh: When did you first meet Fredrik Barth?

Robert: In 1962. He was starting up the anthropology department in Bergen; he wrote to me in the field – would I join him? I did. So when I wasn't in the field I was there in Bergen. That's where I made my first seminar presentations on my recent (and continuing) fieldwork with Aslak. For me it was primarily a matter of putting together the everyday. Incidentally, among the books we discussed as a group were Tinbergen on seagulls and Goffman on presentation on self, also Firth on the distinction between social structure and social organization. Extra stimulus came with personal visits to the seminar by Raymond Firth and Edmund Leach.

Hugh: When did you move to Canada?

Robert: 1965. And a number of Norwegians joined me on research projects. I would also periodically return to Norway – in particular regarding the Alta crisis and the Chernobyl fallout.

Act III

As the curtain rises, it is early dawn; the glasses on the table are empty. The gentlemen are haggard; this interview has been a long haul. Hugh with earphones on is rewinding a tape, listening, and rewinding again, while Robert peers through binoculars out the window with an open bird book in his lap.

Hugh: Contact with you in the early years as I was struggling to complete my Ph.D. dissertation in Uppsala about Saami in Sweden was important to me, because you showed that it was OK to study such things as patronage, colonialism, minority politics, and that it was OK with advocacy. These were not topics then on the menu in the department where I worked. Most importantly, I think, you and the network of people you worked with could demonstrate how one could be doing anthropology about the process of advocacy and ethnic mobilisation.

Moreover, armed with convincing science on such topics one can all the better serve as a useful advocate. This stand is important too, that the scientific endeavour not only be dedicated to the abstract expansion of knowledge, but that knowledge is never politically neutral even if we would like to think so, and we should be concerned *with* the Saami, not just about them. This agreed with my own gut feelings, and I was grateful to have them confirmed.

Robert: No. Damn it! It's completely wrong. The picture is mistaken. (Hugh is at first taken aback, while Robert points with contempt at one of the bird illustrations.) This species does *not* have a curved beak.

Oh, advocacy?

Yes. It is not just a matter of standing up for a good cause, but of uncovering the symbols, the rhetoric and what is being said between the lines. Advocacy debates are dramatic mirrors of how people conceive their relations to their land, other people, their ancestors, and the state. Advocacy and minority/state conflicts need not at all exclude 'science;' they are themselves fields of scientific investigation.

But let's also remember that today one is likely to get anthropologists on both sides of a case. For example a close colleague of mine had worked for several years on the research team of a First Nation; when asked by them to testify in court that they had been since time immemorial in a specific place, he said 'I am sorry, I cannot do that because I don't know.' Had he tried to substantiate the First Nation claim with improper evidence, his testimony could have been challenged by another anthropologist, and the value and respect of the discipline in all future cases could have been forfeited.

Hugh: You engaged in advocacy with regard to Alta, I know. We'll get to that. But first, you were also back in Norway and very much involved with looking at the Saami perspective on Chernobyl, as I was doing on the Swedish side.

Robert: In April of 1986, when the radioactive fallout from the Chernobyl nuclear disaster in the Soviet Union spread over certain reindeer pastures in Scandinavia, the herders faced a dilemma: eat the meat and prejudice our health or refrain and prejudice our culture. Naturally, the required compromise was different for different people, and as one would expect old people were less concerned about the long-term accumulation of health risk, while the diets of children usually were tightly monitored.

Beyond that, what I attempted in my writings about Chernøbyl was some explanation of what the pastoralists themselves were experiencing; of particular importance here was the relationship they had with the scientists. It was one of ambivalence: 'They know naught about reindeer! Nevertheless, in this situation we need them.'

Hugh: There was the same dilemma in Sweden, along with the uncertainty of what it really did mean for health. Remember that Norway came to set its maximal level of Cesium-137 in reindeer meat for it to be marketable at 6000 becquerels/kg, while Sweden's initial level was only 300 becquerels/kg. That's a factor of 20!

Robert: Right! And then we had Saami in Finnmark (unaffected by Chernobyl fallout) who were sending meat from their freezers – from pre-Chernobyl slaughters – only to learn that even this meat could be above the government's becquerel limit due to the atmospheric bomb tests in Nova Zemlia decades earlier.

Hugh: I recall well the conflict over the building of the hydro-electric dam on the Alta-Kautokeino river (some years before Chernobyl): the huge Saami and

environmentalist protests, hunger strikes and resulting massive police action and political fallout in Oslo – nothing like it in Sweden, but it did engage many Swedish Saami and Greens, too, who went north to join the protest. What was your 'take' on it?

Robert: Once again, the Norwegian authorities demonstrated a lack of understanding for pastoral realities and Saami concerns. They talked in terms of quantity of land area which would be lost to herding by the creation of the dam and reservoir. For the Saami it was not so much a matter of how much land. The area in question was an important passageway during migrations. It had major qualitative value and soon came to have incredible symbolic meaning as well for the Saami ethno-political movement – leading eventually to the establishment of the Saami Parliament.

So far as I know, the report I wrote (which became a book: *Dam a River Damn a People*) and submitted upon request to the Norwegian Supreme Court, did no good for the Saami case vis à vis the State; however, individual Saami have thanked me.

Hugh: Oh, the Saami Parliament – what significance do you think the Saami Parliament has for the pastoralists?

Robert: Marginal. First of all, the majority of the members of the Saami Parliament are sedentaries, and there is among them an antipathy towards reindeer pastoralism – as the sedentaries see it the pastoralists seasonally 'invade' their fields and outfields. And second, the pastoralists themselves prefer dealing on a one-to-one basis with the Norwegian State.

Hugh: To return to advocacy matters: did you know then what kinds of issues you would be confronting with advocacy work?

Robert: No, I just went straight into Alta – having been asked; and Chernobyl was a matter of conscience. However, the point I would stress is the raison d'être of advocacy as giving 'models of' the Saami as opposed to those 'models for' which the State always tries.

Hugh: So, you went from being rejected by one Karaskjok group to being a hired hand with another one, to learning the language, to being a partner with a Kautokeino group in the documentation and analysis of herd management, and then phasing into independent analysis and later into advocacy.

Robert: If you say so!

Final curtain

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