



Spring 2014

Obituary: Gerald Berreman (1930–2013)

Jim Fisher

Sam Sonntag

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya>

Recommended Citation

Fisher, Jim and Sonntag, Sam. 2014. Obituary: Gerald Berreman (1930–2013). *HIMALAYA* 34(1).
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol34/iss1/20>

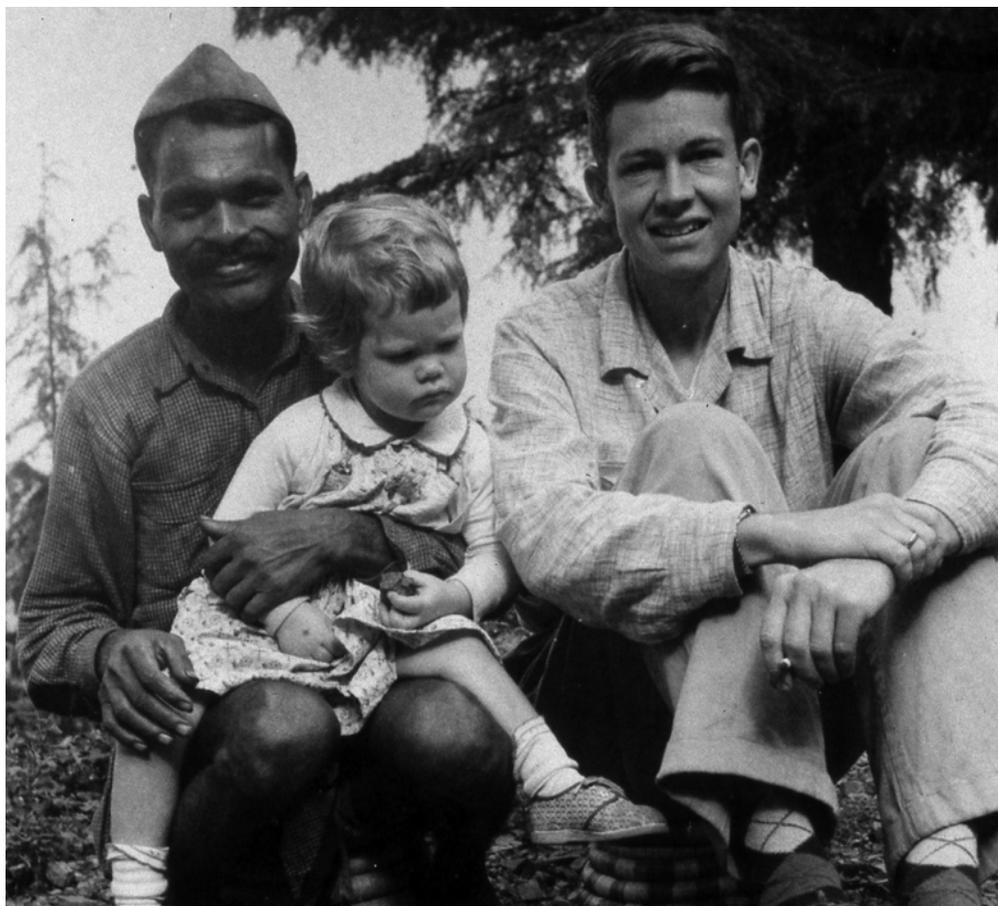


This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

This Other is brought to you for free and open access by the DigitalCommons@Macalester College at DigitalCommons@Macalester College. It has been accepted for inclusion in HIMALAYA, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Macalester College. For more information, please contact scholarpub@macalester.edu.



Obituary | Gerald Berreman (1930–2013)



From right: Berreman, disgruntled Janet, and Safri. Sitting on circular/woven stools.

(Landour, 1958. Berreman Photo Collection)

Scholar and Comic

Gerald Berreman was a highly valued mentor and colleague, and I also felt privileged to call him a good friend. I remember first meeting him when I was just beginning graduate school, and he was already a senior professor (or so he seemed to me) at Berkeley. Since anthropological Himalayanists were a very rare, almost nonexistent, species in those days, as a new kid on the block, I glommed onto him as the major Himalayanist of this country. We met at a dinner table at a conference (probably the AAA), and I was rather surprised to see that he had deigned to sit down amongst his juniors. His demeanor was, as it continued to be many times later, that of just a down-to-earth good old boy. He was full of wisdom and advice, treated everyone

equally, and he took an honest interest in what I wanted to do. I especially remember his sharp and ebullient sense of humor.

Gradually, over the years, I got to know him better. I always admired the principled stands he would take, ethically and morally, regardless of what the strictly anthropological issues may have been. I remember when Louis Dumont was arguing for his hierarchical understanding of Indian society, Gerry wrote a review in which he said that Dumont had been talking to too many Brahmins. And I wonder who but Gerry would have titled an article, “Race, Caste, and Other Invidious Distinctions in Social Stratification”? Social injustice rankled him, wherever he found it. He was unsparing in his disparagement of it, whether in India or America or South Africa. As an anthropologist he

was always intellectually unrelenting in his analyses, but that didn't stop him from speaking out against and fighting injustice wherever he could, regardless of the occasional arrest.

Along these same lines was his reaction to the decision of the administration at Berkeley to rename the anthropology building Hearst Hall, instead of Kroeber Hall, because of all the money Phoebe Hearst had donated to found the department, early in the century. He was an uncompromising opponent of the change, which put recognition and praise of money over historically important scholarship, so he led a strike against the name change. He always put his money where his mouth was, regardless of the consequences. He spoke truth to power.

When I was thinking of publishing a book on Dolpa, I asked him about a suitable title. Gerry, whose own book was titled *Hindus of the Himalayas*, suggested, with panache, "Buddhists on the Bheri" (the river in northwest Nepal where I had worked). As things worked out, I didn't use it, but that's the sort of snappy, alliterative phrase he would often come up with.

Since I had taught Gerry's book in courses, I had always been curious to see what the village where he worked actually looked like. So I went to Dehra Dun, and hired a taxi to take me to Sirkanda (the pseudonym he used for Sarona). But about six miles from the village, we came across a huge landslide covering the bumpy, rocky mountain road, which stopped the taxi cold. Having come so far, I couldn't bear to turn back, so I decided to run the remaining six miles to the village. After arriving I hurriedly walked around for about 20 minutes, took a few pictures, and then ran back to the stalled taxi. Later I told him I intended to write a devastating critique of the many errors in his ethnography, based on my twenty minute visit to his fieldwork site. We always got a good laugh out of that.

In addition to admiring his ethnography, I also admired his spontaneous sense of humor, which was never far from the surface. Once, his wife, Keiko, appeared on a panel for which Gerry was a commentator. After Keiko had finished her presentation and was shuffling her papers together, Gerry commented that her paper was interesting, but sounded familiar, and he wondered if the reason could be plagiarism of his own work. Keiko, stunned, immediately dropped her papers and looked at him as if he was crazy; of course it was all in fun, as he made clear in his subsequent, unstinting praise of her presentation.

In later years, we always supported each other's scholarship, and I was always pleased to see him return to the

Himalayas, whether to his old research site in Garhwal, or, increasingly, and to my great gratification, to Nepal, where I had often urged him to go. Wherever he was, and in whatever capacity, he was not just a scholar, but a man of principle, who stuck to his guns whatever the issue was, and there were many. I count myself fortunate to have known him and to have benefitted from his counsel, his wisdom, his scholarship, his friendship, and his ubiquitous and indomitable wit.

By Jim Fisher

Kathmandu Memories

At Gerry Berreman's recent memorial service at the University of California at Berkeley, an elegant and emotional event, remembrances of Gerry as a scholar, activist, teacher, and colleague were invoked. I learned of his courageous role in the anti-Vietnam War struggle at Berkeley while a young faculty member and of his pioneering scholarship on rethinking the traditional orientalist category of caste at the beginning of his academic career. These were memories of Gerry with which I was only slightly familiar, but which resonated with my own personal memories of him as a friend and mentor.

I first met Gerry and Keiko, newlyweds at the time, in Kathmandu in February 1994. Gerry and I were both Fulbright scholars. I was accompanied by my husband, Bob White, our four-year-old daughter, Yasmine, and, for a while, my mother. Our Fulbright-provided houses in Tangal were only blocks apart and we all became fast friends. Gerry's wit and humor, often applied to his observations and experiences in Kathmandu, were always the highlight of our many evenings spent together. We took advantage of his amazing ability to ferret out the extraordinary experience—like the time that my husband, daughter, mother and I had the best ever head-and-neck massage (well, maybe my daughter didn't think it was so great!), upon Gerry's recommendation, in a hair salon on the road out to Boudhanath. The icing on the cake was the experiences Gerry and Bob had in obtaining driver's licenses and then venturing out on Kathmandu's 'all-purpose' roads (i.e., purposes not limited to driving, such as livestock foraging, drinking *chiya*, manually hauling goods and doing *puja*) in our Fulbright-provided cars. A few of those ventures were harrowing enough to not want to cherish the memory!

A cake featured prominently on our return trip in the winter of 1996 - 1997 to Nepal, which we coordinated to coincide with one of many of Gerry and Keiko's returns.

This time, Keiko's research on Nepali migrant workers to Japan was in full throttle and I was attempting some follow-up research on language policy issues. This left Gerry, Bob, and Yasmine, now seven, to roam the streets of Thamel near our hotel, bargaining for and buying far more *khukuri* than we ever would want, plus any toy or gadget that my daughter desired (and didn't need). On one of these outings, they passed a spanking-new bakery. Keiko's birthday was in a couple of days. Yasmine talked Gerry and Bob into ordering a cake for the occasion with "Cake-O"—a seven-year-old's spelling rendition of Keiko's name—iced on the top.

Our friendship with Gerry and Keiko continued throughout the years in Berkeley and Arcata in California. During this time, Gerry became my mentor in so many ways. He gave me invaluable feedback on articles I submitted for publication, ranging, in one case, from suggesting I look at Fredrik Barth's classical work (with absolutely no admonishing hint that, even as a political scientist, I really should have been familiar with Barth's work), to gently informing me to add in an author's first name when first used in the text of my article. Gerry encouraged me to seek election to the ANHS board back in the mid-1990s, enthusiastically prodding me on, nominating me and endorsing me at the Madison meeting. He wrote innumerable letters of recommendation for me. He obtained access to the Berkeley library (and, more importantly, VIP parking next to the library) for me during a short research trip. He and Keiko came up to Humboldt State University a number of times to give public talks—one of the most memorable was Gerry's talk on the Chipko movement. His unpretentiousness accompanied by incisive insights that many commented on at his memorial were the hallmark of Gerry Berreman as mentor, at least for me.

As Mark Baker, my colleague here at Humboldt State University and a fellow ANHS member in the mid-1990s, commented upon hearing of Gerry's passing: "Gerry's *Hindus of the Himalayas* was *de rigueur* reading in graduate school. His death marks the end of a generation." Gerry defined Himalayan studies not only for his generation but for the following generations. I will miss my friend and mentor.

By Sam Sonntag