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Mark W. Post

University of Sydney

Steve Burling

University of Michigan

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In Memoriam *Robbins Burling, 1926 – 2021*

Mark W. Post
University of Sydney

Steve Burling
University of Michigan

Robbins Burling, Professor Emeritus of Anthropology and Linguistics at the University of Michigan, passed away peacefully on January 2, 2021, at the age of 94 after a full, rich life. A giant in the fields of anthropological linguistics, language evolution and language pedagogy, Burling was particularly known for his pioneering work in ethnography and linguistics of northeastern India, where he conducted his doctoral fieldwork and to where he returned for research visits until the latter years of his life. Burling's work has played a seminal role in the development of Trans-Himalayan (Tibeto-Burman) linguistics, inspiring generations of scholars and producing some of the field's most formative works.

Robbins Burling (Rob; he disliked being called "Dr." or "Professor") was born on April 18, 1926 in Minneapolis, Minnesota, the oldest of three children born to Dr. F. Temple and Katherine White Burling. He grew up in Illinois, New Jersey and Rhode Island, but considered himself a Midwesterner at heart. After graduating high school in 1944 he entered the Navy and served two years as a Radar Technician. He earned a bachelor's degree from Yale (1950) on the G.I. bill, then spent a year working and traveling around the world, an experience he treasured for the rest of his life.

After returning to the US in 1951, Rob married his college sweetheart, Sibyl Straub, and began work on his Ph.D. (Harvard 1958). In 1954, he received a Ford Foundation Scholarship that took him and his young family to northeast India for two years to study and work with the Garo of Rengsanggri, leading to many life-long friendships and the beginning of his prolific writing career. After completing his doctorate, he worked at the University of Pennsylvania as an instructor before receiving a Fulbright Scholarship in 1959, which took the family to Burma for a year at the University of Rangoon. He returned to Penn as an Assistant Professor of Anthropology and Assistant Curator of General Ethnology at the University Museum at Penn.

These early years of Rob's career saw the publication of several groundbreaking works in linguistics and anthropology, including *A Garo Grammar* (1961) – the first modern grammar of a northeast Indian language; a reconstruction of Proto-Bodo (in *Language*, 1959) – the first reconstruction of a Trans-Himalayan language at the subgroup level; a pioneering study of early child language acquisition in a minority language setting (in *Word*, 1959); a monograph *Rengsanggri: Family and Kinship in a Garo Village* (1963); a popular textbook *Hill Farms and Padi Fields: Life in Mainland Southeast Asia* (1965, re-issued in 1992); and an influential reconstruction of Proto-Lolo-Burmese in 1967.

In 1963, Rob received a one-year Fellowship to the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University. In 1964 he joined the University of Michigan as an associate professor of anthropology. In 1966 he became professor of linguistics and anthropology, and associate of the Center for South and Southeast Asian Studies. In 1971, Rob received a Guggenheim Fellowship which took the family to Toulouse, France for a year. In 1979-80 he was a visiting professor at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden. After returning to Michigan, Rob served as interim director of the (then new) Program in Linguistics from 1985-86. He retired from Michigan as Emeritus Professor in 1995.

Throughout his career, Rob Burling's work has been marked by an uncompromising scholarly excellence, a product of its solid empirical grounding in first-hand field data, as well as Rob's trademark methodological rigor. Rob published more than 130 articles, chapters and reviews across the fields of social and cultural anthropology, descriptive and historical linguistics, language pedagogy and linguistic theory. In many of these works, he engaged in some of the major debates of his era, especially regarding the nature and origin of human language.

Yet all who knew Rob could not fail to also be impressed by the palpable love he felt for the northeast Indian region, its people, and their languages, and this sense of love and joyful intimacy pervaded his work. His lifelong fascination with the Garo language culminated with a 2004 three-volume study *The Language of the Modhupur Mandi (Garo)*, which uniquely presented a modern, comprehensive analysis of Garo grammar and lexicon in a highly accessible prose style. His fascination with language evolution culminated around the same time in a popular volume *The Talking Ape: How Language Evolved* (2005). And Rob's skill as a teacher is nowhere better epitomized than by his 1992 introductory linguistics textbook *Patterns of Language* – which many linguists feel remains one of the best, and most accessible, linguistics textbooks ever written.

After retirement Rob continued to travel (he made it to all seven continents) and write. In 2016, Rob was honored with a Festschrift just before his 90th birthday at the 8th International conference of the North East Indian Linguistics Society (NEILS) – a conference Rob had attended faithfully since its inception in 2005. That same year he also published a treatise on spelling, *Spellbound*, written from his lifetime perspective of being a self-professed “terrible speller”. Rob was renowned for his concise, unpretentious, and accessible writing, but it was not until his happy discovery in college that a bad speller could still be a good writer that he began to write in earnest.

Rob loved his work and enjoyed the travel that it entailed, but he also loved working with his hands and was very proud of the fact that he not only designed his own house and two cabins, but that he built them himself, with the help of his son, occasionally roping in other family and unsuspecting friends. The family gatherings and activities every summer at a lake in Northern Ontario were also a source of deep pleasure. It was there that Rob grew to love canoeing and he remained an avid canoeist until nearly the end of his life, winning two gold medals at the age of 79 in the Michigan Senior Olympics. He was proud of his family, pleased that he had known seven generations, and that after the birth of his great granddaughter, was able to appear in his fourth four-generation photo.

Rob was predeceased by his wife Sibyl, his partner Anne Hvenekilde of Oslo, Norway, his brother James and his sister Helen. He is survived by his partner Sheila Procter and her family in England, his children, Stephen (Deborah), Helen “Nono” (Charles Pitz) and Adele (Fritz Yunck), four grandsons and a great granddaughter, several beloved nieces and nephews and daughter-in-spirit Beth Genne (Allan Gibbard) in the US. In Norway he is survived by Anne's children, Karin and Audun Hvenekilde and their families.

In Rob's passing, we have lost one of the finest friends, colleagues, mentors, and family members that it seems possible to have. Yet we are grateful for the many memories, and the many great works that he has left us. Rob will be deeply missed by his family and friends around the world and across all walks of life, by the many students that he mentored and by the colleagues with whom he worked.

Further reading: *Language and Culture in Northeast India and Beyond: In Honor of Robbins Burling* (available for free download at <http://hdl.handle.net/1885/38458>) contains an Introduction which provides more information about Rob Burling's life and work, as well as a chapter by James A. Matisoff which offers a detailed critical assessment of several of Rob's contributions to Trans-Himalayan linguistics from a specialist's perspective. It also contains several photographs, and a (hopefully) comprehensive bibliography of Burling's publications, updated and reprinted below. Another useful source which looks back on Burling's career as an anthropologist is Brereton, Derek P. (2006). "A fair reflection: The 'dirt anthropology' of Robbins Burling". In D. P. Brereton, Ed. *Retrospectives: Works and Lives of Michigan Anthropologists* 16(1): 248–276.

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Mark W. Post
mark.post@sydney.edu.au