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Remembering Erving Goffman

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Remembering Erving Goffman

Frederick Elkin

Frederick Elkin, Professor Emeritus of Sociology and Anthropology at York University, wrote this memoir at the request of Dmitri Shalin and gave his approval for posting the present version in the Erving Goffman Archives. The memoir was received on March 7, 2009, with the addendum received on March 9, 2009.

[Posted 03-09-09]

March 7, 2009

Dear Dmitri Shalin

I can't give you much information on Erving Goffman and I don't trust my memory but here goes,

I met but hardly knew Erving Goffman soon after World War II when I returned to the University of Chicago. I think of him as associated with Lloyd Warner who was not then considered the most intellectual of the faculty. The brightest students tended to work with Wirth, Hughes, Blumer and Stouffer. In 1947, I moved to California and heard later that Goffman had gone off to Scotland on some project but I didn't know why. I later knew his work and heard rumors of him which I'm sure you know about. One was that his wife committed suicide--I'm just not sure now.

When many years later, I was chairman of the sociology department at York--maybe 1967 or 98 or so--, I invited him to come to York to give a lecture and received a pleasant note back saying "No" and he added that we probably couldn't afford him anyway.

Many years later, I heard he had remarried to--I seem to have a mental lock and just don't recall her name--a girl from Quebec whom I knew fairly well since I succeeded her as President of the Canadian Sociology Association and had several meetings with her. I have an excellent picture of her--warm, intelligent, efficient, sensible, conscientious.

I hope this is helpful.

Fred Elkin

March 9

. . .Let me add: I should have said "Canadian Sociology and Anthropology Association" which it was at the time. The split between sociology and anthropology came soon after. Gillian was an anthropologist.

Thank you for the added information and especially Gillian's name.

I returned to the University of Chicago in late 1946. Erving Goffman came later. I cannot remember when I met him, I may have first heard of him from Warner.

A guess on his height--[he was] 5'7--strictly a guess. I vaguely remember a story later that he had two heads--one conversing and one analyzing. Source: I don't know.

I hope this is helpful.

Fred Elkin