

HENRY B. NICHOLSON¹

OBITUARIO

El 2 de marzo de 2007 falleció en la ciudad de Los Ángeles el doctor Henry B. Nicholson. Nacido en San Diego en 1925, se graduó en Antropología en la Universidad de California, Berkeley, en 1949, no sin antes haber prestado sus servicios en la II Guerra Mundial (1944-1945). Posteriormente estudió Derecho para, finalmente, doctorarse en Antropología en la Universidad de Harvard (1958) siendo presidente del jurado otro distinguido mesoamericanista: el doctor Gordon Willey, quien en las palabras de presentación de la tesis dijo: “Henry was one of my best graduate students at the time”.²

Siendo muy joven aún se sintió atraído por la cultura maya y emprendió sus primeras visitas a museos como el San Diego Museum of Man y el Balboa Park en compañía de su madre Evelyn, lo que tuvo una influencia definitiva en su formación posterior. En 1935 se realizó una exposición en San Diego —la primera había sido en 1915-1916 en donde se exhibían algunos edificios de Quiriguá y pinturas de sitios mayas—, parte de los cuales fueron incorporados a la nueva exposición en San Diego que impactaron profundamente al joven Nick, lo que unido a una serie de lecturas de estudiosos del mundo maya, como J. Alden Mason y Sylvanus G. Morley, ampliaron su interés en Mesoamérica. Un hecho significativo ocurrió cuando Nick tuvo su primer contacto con Quetzalcóatl en 1936 a través de una conferencia que escuchó, en donde se decía que Quetzalcóatl era el mismo Jesucristo que había venido a América a predicar después de haberlo hecho en el Viejo Mundo.³ Pronto se decidió por el estudio de los aztecas o mexicas, a los que dedicó toda su vida. Su interés por esta cultura se debió a la

¹ Agradezco al doctor Leonardo López Luján haberme facilitado datos y la bibliografía completa del doctor Nicholson.

² Gordon Willey, “Foreword” al libro de Henry B. Nicholson *Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl, the once and future Lord of the Toltecs*, University Press of Colorado, 2001, p. v-vi.

³ H. B. Nicholson, “Reminiscences: The San Diego Museum of Man and Balboa Park in the 1930s and 1940s”, in *Current topics in Aztec Studies, essays in honor of Dr. H. B. Nicholson*, San Diego Museum Papers 30, 1993, p. 111-118.

gran cantidad de fuentes históricas y pictografías con que se contaba además de existir un buen número de objetos arqueológicos factibles de estudiarse desde diversas perspectivas, entre los que se encuentran aspectos rituales, religiosos y estéticos.

Desde su primera estancia en México, en 1946, pasó muchas horas en el Museo Nacional de Antropología, llamando su atención la famosa “Sala de los Monolitos”, de la que tomó notas que posteriormente serían fundamentales para la creación, años más tarde, del Archivo Azteca de fotografías en la UCLA. Guardó amistad con varios investigadores mexicanos como don Wigberto Jiménez Moreno, Ignacio Bernal y Alfonso Caso.

Más de doscientos títulos de índole diversa (libros, artículos, reseñas, colaboración en catálogos, entrevistas, etcétera) son los trabajos con los que contribuyó al conocimiento de los temas de su predilección, que se inician en 1953 con su primera publicación en *American Antiquity* y aún hoy tenemos algunas que están en proceso de editarse. El mismo Nicholson consideraba como sus artículos más relevantes “The Mixteca-Puebla concept in Mesoamerican Archaeology: a Reexamination”, incluido en *Ancient Mesoamerica* (1981). Otro trabajo que consideró interesante es “Religion in Pre-Hispanic Central Mexico” que formó parte del volumen 10 del *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, editado en 1971, además de haber sido editor asociado de los volúmenes 14 y 15 del mismo *Handbook...* También participó de manera destacada en la *Oxford Encyclopedia of Mesoamerican Cultures* coordinada por el doctor David Carrasco, a quien se debe, entre otras cosas, la edición de la tesis doctoral de Nick por la University Press of Colorado bajo el título *Tōpiltzīn Quetzalcoatl, the once and future Lord of the Toltecs*.

Un trabajo que absorbió buena parte de su tiempo fue el de la creación, en 1959, del Archivo Azteca patrocinado por la Universidad de California, Los Ángeles (UCLA), universidad en la que trabajó alrededor de 35 años y en la que logró reunir miles de fotografías y diapositivas de objetos aztecas depositados en diferentes museos. Se trata, sin lugar a dudas, de uno de los grandes acervos producto del interés y conocimiento de su creador. Fue en esta universidad en donde Nick desarrolló diversos trabajos y publicaciones y en la que se le nombró *Emeritus Professor of Anthropology* por sus contribuciones y destacada acción tanto en la investigación como en la formación de nuevos profesionistas.

Durante las últimas tres décadas buena parte de los trabajos de Nick estuvieron estrechamente relacionados con el doctor David Carrasco y el “Mesoamerican Archive” cuando éste estuvo en la Universidad de Colorado, Boulder, y después en Princeton y Harvard. Habíamos crea-

do un grupo de estudios mesoamericanos que reunía eventualmente a algunos de los más destacados investigadores del centro de México. En ellas participaron amigos hoy desaparecidos como Pedro Armillas, Doris Heyden y Paul Wheatley, este último dedicado al urbanismo de sociedades orientales. La presencia de Nick en las diversas reuniones siempre dejaba un halo de sabiduría y enseñanza. Recuerdo su interés en lo que ocurría en las excavaciones del Templo Mayor y siempre quería estar al tanto de lo que se iba encontrando. Consideraba al Proyecto Templo Mayor como un parteaguas en la arqueología que proporcionaba “nueva luz para el estudio de la religión y el ritual azteca”.⁴

En lo que a mí respecta, una de las grandes satisfacciones que he recibido en mi vida aconteció en el año 2002, cuando la Universidad de Harvard me otorgó la preseca “H. B. Nicholson Harvard Medal for Excellence in Mesoamerican Studies”. Nick estuvo presente y un buen número de amigos me acompañaron aquella noche en el Peabody Museum, encabezados por el promotor del acto, doctor David Carrasco. Después de escuchar sus palabras y las de Nick, dije lo siguiente:

La segunda razón de sentir un enorme orgullo es que la medalla lleva el nombre de un gran maestro y amigo: el doctor Henry Nicholson. Ningún investigador que desee penetrar en el conocimiento de Mesoamérica puede pasar por alto los estudios que el doctor Nicholson ha llevado a cabo acerca de las culturas mesoamericanas. Doctorado en Harvard, cuyo comité doctoral lo presidió el doctor Willey, considero que el reconocimiento que hoy se hace a Henry Nicholson muestra lo valioso de una vida dedicada a la investigación y a la formación de nuevos estudiosos en el campo mesoamericano. Si siempre admiré a Nick por su sabiduría y su alegría de vivir, hoy me congratulo de recibir una medalla que lleva su nombre.⁵

La última vez que estuve con Nick fue en Londres en el año 2006, en la reunión que bajo el tema de *Tezcatlipoca* nos permitió, una vez más, escuchar sus sabias palabras y sus brillantes intervenciones. Se le veía cansado pero animoso, con la sonrisa siempre presta a mostrarse. Pasaron los meses y hace unos días recibí la terrible noticia: el doctor Henry B. Nicholson había fallecido en su casa por un ataque al corazón.

⁴ “Henry B. Nicholson, presencia en la arqueología y la etnohistoria de Mesoamérica”, entrevista de Bertina Olmedo Vera, *Arqueología Mexicana*, v. VI, n. 31, 1998, México, p. 60-65.

⁵ Eduardo Matos Moctezuma, “Palabras con motivo de la entrega de la Medalla “H. B. Nicholson Harvard Medal for Excellence in Mesoamerican Studies”, en *Memoria 2003*, México, El Colegio Nacional, 2003, p. 173-174.

Con su muerte queda un vacío difícil de llenar. Sus aportes, inteligencia y simpatía serán siempre recordados por quienes nos considerábamos sus amigos.

El hombre perece; su obra perdura...

EDUARDO MATOS MOCTEZUMA
Museo del Templo Mayor
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