

Caroline Humphrey

Born 1943.

Life story interview by Alan Macfarlane.

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The text of this life story is transcribed, with thanks and acknowledgement, from the collection of Filmed Interviews with Leading Thinkers at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Cambridge. The interview was carried out by Prof. Alan Macfarlane on 5th August 2010, and was transcribed by Sarah Harrison. The video is here: <https://www.sms.cam.ac.uk/media/1154637>

1. Parents

I was born in London in 1943. My paternal (Waddington) grandfather was a tea planter in India in the Nilgiri Hills so my father, who was a scientist, was born in India and remembered it with great affection. I never met my grandfather as he died in India but I saw letters that he sent to my father when he was at school. I do not know much about that side of my family but I was influenced indirectly by the thought of India as a wonderful land.

On my mother's side, my great-grandfather was quite a high official in New Zealand - Pember Reeves. He was a reformer who brought in things like votes for women before they happened in Britain. My grandmother was a Fabian and quite an intellectual - Amber Pember Reeves. She read moral sciences at Newnham and she was a big influence on my life. She had an affair with H.G. Wells when she was a student which was a big scandal at the time. She became pregnant so my aunt is her daughter by H.G. Wells; as he was not going to marry her, to her rescue came a nice young lawyer, my grandfather, who made her respectable. His name was Blanco-White, and in the family there was a legend that Blanco was a Spanish Jewish family who fled from Spain and ended up in Britain, and took the name White to explain the Blanco.

I later discovered that this probably is not true, that White was an Irish sea captain who went to Spain and took the Blanco to explain the White. This family was very Catholic and some time in the late nineteenth century a rather famous Blanco-White took exception to this religiosity and ran away from Spain and settled in England. He was an anti-religious figure and a poet and pamphleteer. He was, I think, my grandfather's ancestor. I knew both these grandparents well; my grandmother was a very intellectual figure and quite scary; she used to say that the only respectable academic discipline was mathematics, and things like music were positively disgraceful. She used to teach in Morley College in London, an adult education college. She taught philosophy so was very logical. My grandfather was a much more cheery, rosy figure; he was a family lawyer and used to enjoy talking about cases.

My mother was one of Amber's three children; she was very artistic and became an architect. She also had some of her mother's rigour and was an architect in the Bauhaus, modern, stylish mode in Britain. She did build a couple of houses in Cambridge; however, after the War, very little was being built of that kind. She became an architect for Edinburgh City Council. She worked all through her life so I had this example of a working woman as my mother. She was a loving mother but she admired elegance and style, and it was the same with thoughts and ideas.

My father, C.H. Waddington, came up to Cambridge and I think he read geology; he was very friendly with people like Bernal and other well known Cambridge people of the 1930s, Needham was another friend of his. He moved into genetics after graduating as a geologist. I think he had a research fellowship at Sidney Sussex. Both he and my mother were rather on the left; my mother was actually a member of the Communist Party, my father was not, but they were both in that group of intellectuals. I must have met Bernal as a child, I met Gregory Bateson

who was a great friend of my father's, also Margaret Mead who was influential on me. She was terrific and I met her in my teens. I think my father always thought anthropology an interesting subject. At that time it was difficult to travel but he did so when he could, to Africa and so on. Part of this was Margaret Mead arriving with stories of islands in the Pacific. I remember her saying to me once that if I wanted to be an anthropologist, not to worry about it too much as six weeks was enough to learn any language - not really very good advice. She was full of energy and I would have thought quite attractive, especially in her youth.

My father (right) was quite a shy man but he had a great sense of fun; he loved new things and was always travelling. He went to America, he listened to jazz, and liked things like John Cage's experimental music which consisted of almost nothing. I remember him telling me about one of John Cage's art ideas which was to do with water and the different taste of different waters. This art object consisted of tasting about fifteen different waters. He was intrigued by things like that; he wrote a book about abstract painting in the fifties and sixties, and the influence of scientific visions on that; what was suddenly available as an insight into the structure of something through science, and how that opened the eyes of painters during that period. My own connection with the Fitzwilliam Museum and my own interest in art stems from my parents.



2. Childhood

I grew up in Edinburgh; I remember the house we moved into after the War when I must have been about four. It was in effect a kind of commune; it was a large eighteenth century mansion outside Edinburgh which my father's institute rented for the entire institute. It was a new institute and was just being set up, and as people did not have enough money to buy houses everybody was in it from the lab technicians to the professor.

It was wonderful for us children because there was a separate dining room for us and we had lots of other children to play with; it was a huge estate with a great garden around it with statues and fountains, so we had an absolutely wonderful time there.



Morton Hall, near Edinburgh.

I have a younger sister and a half-brother from my father's first marriage; this place, Morton Hall, may be one of the things that lies behind me being an anthropologist. It was more fun for the children than for the adults. I think the notion of people living in a commune was very difficult after the War; the women especially felt that they couldn't express themselves as women because there was no kitchen, just communal eating. They couldn't be wives in the way they thought they ought or wanted to be. I didn't know about it at the time but I gather there were all sorts of rumours of affairs and so on.

It fell apart after about four or five years, and we moved into Edinburgh. My first school was a P.N.E.U. school which was thought to be progressive; it was a pleasant place; I remember a lot of emphasis was placed on art and painting. It wasn't very hot on learning to read and write so I didn't really learn to do so until I went to my next school; that was a standard Edinburgh high school and I went there between seven and eight. I remember coming into the bottom class not knowing how to read and write; one thing we did in our family was quite a lot of painting and

sketching, so I guess I was taught from an early age to look at landscapes, trees or places, and to think how you might capture them.

The other thing I did was music; when we moved into Edinburgh we were living in the same street as a refugee composer from Vienna called Hans Gal; his daughter became a very close friend of me and my sister, and almost immediately we all had lessons in playing instruments and started playing in little trios and quartets. That was a very strong element all through my childhood; I played the piano, and still do. I was annoyed because my sister played the piano and the cello and because of that she could play in many more things, and play in an orchestra. I wanted to learn the violin but my mother forbade me because I was not actually very good at school and was always tailing along the bottom of the class; I think she thought I couldn't handle two instruments and school work

Classical music has been very important throughout my life; it is not that I don't like other music but I play classical music. I came to have a very good teacher from the age of about twelve, but when I went to university I practically gave it up. There wasn't a teacher here and I was doing other things, and when I was away in Russia doing fieldwork, it became impossible. Although I had a piano at home I didn't do very much, but when I was in my forties I got a two year readership and had a bit more time, so I took piano lessons again; more recently, in the last five years, I have again been taking lessons. It is the most wonderful thing because it is completely apart from academic work as you use a different part of your brain. It is a question of honing your listening and making that coordinate with your physical movements - tiny things, and very fast, so you have to be completely in control, aware and alert. Since it is so engaging of the mind it is a real break from the obsessions of writing; I play Bach, Beethoven, Schubert, all the greats. I suppose it indirectly feeds into my writing in so far as music has a structure, and a phrase of music has a shape.

Perhaps one would try to emulate that in one's writing so that it is not too lumpy and awkward; more directly, I suppose, because I loved music it was one of the main reasons why I went to Russia as an anthropologist. When I was still at school I had a great passion for the Russian cellist Rostropovich, at the time when people like him had just come to the West. And the Russian pianist, Richter who became an abiding hero because he is such a great pianist; one of the reasons I was so happy to choose Russia was because all these wonderful musicians were there

The high school was a girls' school and quite strict; I remember loving English, history, art; I don't think it was a distinguished school and a lot more of my education came from being in the kind of family I was in, meeting people my parents knew, the fact that there were books everywhere in the house and the fact that one could be reading something they had never thought of at school. I was a keen reader; I remember reading Proust at the age of sixteen - perhaps not the whole lot, but several books.

My parents had sent me away to France when I was quite young; at fourteen I went on an exchange, and then did so three summers running with a group of French families. That made me love French culture and the language, so was a good thing to have done. I don't think I am a good linguist as I treat languages as working tools and have never done a really formal course in Russian, for example. Mongolian was

not really something one could do anything very formal with, so I don't think I speak them very correctly, but I am reasonably fluent in French and Russian, and more or less in Mongolian.

I stayed at that school until I was eighteen; I must have got the average number of Scottish Highers and was desperate to go to university, but not to Edinburgh because I wanted to avoid my parents;. I said that I wanted to go to Cambridge but the headmistress said I was not up to that standard and would make the school look bad if I failed; that really annoyed me and I started to work for the first time in my life. My mother helped by getting me extra tuition, so I got some 'A' levels - history, English, and history of art - and got into Cambridge.

I remember my English teacher, my art teacher and my history teacher, Miss Pearson, who was an enormous influence. I was most influenced by my piano teacher, Miss Edna Lovell. It was a hearty school and I tried my best, but I was no good at it; I was in the third hockey team for my house; theatre, debating, and that kind of thing I did at Cambridge, not at school.

3. Religion

My parents were atheists so I had no religious education except what happened at school; for me, churches were mysterious places with possible glamorous goings-on, because I never went into them. I suppose I was aware that other people would go to Sunday school, but I do remember in my teens thinking I ought to sneak out and actually go to churches to see what went on in them.

I did try to look inside some churches in Edinburgh, but it was a pretty frosty city and the churches were not places you could drop into. I suppose I was rather ignorant of all that and remain so to some extent; when, here in Cambridge, people go to chapel, and I have to do so now for various reasons, everybody lustily sings hymns that they all know, but I don't know them.

I think perhaps this thwarted early interest was why I became interested in shamanism and other religious faiths. I also did become interested in Christianity, and for a period was quite religious; I did get confirmed in the Church of England in middle-age, so it is a dimension of life that I have some feeling for, though I am not very active now.

I suppose I would think of myself as agnostic; I think the culture of religion, or what religious people have done in our history, is so enormous that it is part of the background of being a European. You cannot ignore it, and to understand it you have to have some feeling for what it means to be religious. I think science can disprove many of the claims of people who are religious - the absurdity of particular dates of creation, or miracles - but I don't think science could do anything about what people feel about essential mysteries which we don't understand and may never understand.

Yet we have intimations that there are things that maybe our brains are not capable of appreciating; at any rate there does seem to be some order behind things that we don't have an explanation for; all of that kind of thing is part of being human, and I don't think that science is going to disprove it or prove it. Some of the things shaman do are very extraordinary in terms of creating transformations in other people, which you might call curing or reviving. I don't have any explanation for it; the people who believe in it see it as religious in some sense, and it is very remarkable.

I do think there are some very gifted people, gifted in some ways that our culture left in abeyance. I have always thought the idea that you have individualism in the West, and that elsewhere people conform to cultures, just ridiculous; the most in a sense individualistic people in my experience are shamans. They have the most extraordinary personalities, absolutely riveting and strange, and they can do things with their ways of talking, looking and addressing people.

I have had experience with one particular shaman whose ability was to sense other personalities within people that were not obvious. The way she put this was not in terms of personality, but about a spirit you might have that you don't know about, or a previous life; she said she was capable of drawing this out of you. She did this for

me and several friends - who knows what there was about it? - but it didn't appear haphazard or meaningless; she described it as former existences.

4. Girton College Cambridge



Girton College, Cambridge.

Just before I left my school in Edinburgh a new headmistress arrived who had been a don at Girton. She suggested that I apply to Girton and that is why I came to Cambridge. I wanted to read English as I wanted to be a writer, but English at Girton was full that year so they gave me a place to read anthropology. It was accidental, but I have never regretted it. I remember Meyer Fortes who was seemingly strict and quite dry; I came to appreciate him later but at the time his lectures seemed old-fashioned.

Far more exciting at that time were Edmund Leach (right) and Stanley Tambiah, who was also there. Maurice Bloch was a graduate student at the time and also supervised me; all of them were doing a different kind of anthropology than Fortes, and I was much more excited by it; I was perhaps dimly aware that there were tensions between Leach and Fortes, but one was much more aware that they just took a different line on anthropology, and might almost have had different definitions of what it was.



Jack Goody was there but I didn't have much to do with him; he was associated with Fortes and African studies and I was more interested in Asia. Maurice was not especially interesting as an undergraduate supervisor. I knew him better and discovered his research work when I was a graduate student. There was a woman at Girton who was a very good teacher, Doris Wheatley, and Audrey Richards was a wonderful supervisor. Those people had a passion for anthropology and made it seem exciting as a subject; I never regretted doing it instead of English.

My student contemporaries included Jonathan Parry, Enid Schildkrout, Keith Hart, Stephen Hugh-Jones, Marilyn Strathern was a few years older, and Susan Drucker Brown. The myth that everyone mingled and went together to the bun shop was not true of me; I felt being stuck out at Girton that there was probably a little inner

group based in King's because both Fortes and Leach were fellows there, and that perhaps students there did that kind of thing.

Most of my time in Cambridge I was in the ADC theatre and not very devotedly doing anthropology, although I was interested in it. Levi-Strauss was the thing in those days; I remember reading 'La Pensee Sauvage' and various other books by him and found them really exciting. That was the kind of research Edmund was doing and Mary Douglas was writing her great works at that time. Tambiah was also involved; it was opening up a whole new world, and one was aware that anthropology was also interesting to those outside the subject.

Any educated person would be reading Levi-Strauss (right) at that time and people would be interested in anthropology, which has completely disappeared now. Perhaps people now think there is nothing left to discover, but I think it was more that Levi-Strauss and the structuralists in general had a theory of looking at culture which was much wider, more philosophical than purely anthropological.



It was taken as an approach in literary studies and all sorts of different areas of academia. It was also a universal idea, something that told you about humankind that people had not thought of before. I suppose a lot of theories in anthropology now have become so relativistic and tied to specifics, that it has become much less interesting for people in general.

5. PhD Research

I got a 2:1 but it was good enough at that time to do research. I had decided I wanted to work in Russia, so as soon as I graduated I enrolled in a course in Russian language which was done on the Sidgwick site by some ex-army tutors; it was a very efficient course where they just barked it into you; you were not allowed to speak a word of English for six weeks and by the end it was possible to get along in Russian.

For some reason Meyer was appointed as my supervisor but he was very against my working in Russia. He said it was too closed and propagandized and that nobody would talk to me, and that the last anthropologist who had tried to go there, James Woodburn, was thrown out. I was put down to study peasants in Poland, but I still wanted to go to Russia. It so happened that during that academic year Meyer was off on sabbatical in America, and while he was away I started working on some people called Yakut, now called Sakha, living in the north of Siberia, and preparing myself to go and do fieldwork there.

I spent a year reading every single thing I could on them and in registering for the British Council exchange scheme with Russia. I managed to get a studentship from them, and by the time Fortes came back it was more or less a fait accompli that I was going to Russia. During his absence I had not been supervised by anyone else; in those days it was much more free and easy; there was no pre-fieldwork training and no advice was given on what to do.

We were even told that we should avoid going to the field with too much theory ('preconceptions'), so as to keep ourselves open to every kind of experience. We did have a sort of training from the Foreign Office before going to Russia because this was at the height of the Cold War, and it was reckoned we would come under scrutiny from the KGB. About twelve of us went to this place in the Foreign Office and they told us of the various ways we could be entrapped by the KGB; I remember we all came out laughing thinking it was rubbish; but in fact it all happened more or less as they predicted.

It was lucky for me that the Russian KGB was rather sexist; there were not many women in our British group but a lot of the men had problems. We women were left much more alone. The men would be made drunk, or drugged on one occasion, and would wake up in bed with some woman and a photographer would burst in, that kind of thing. At that time in the 1960s my mother was no longer a member of the Party; she had left in 1956 at the time of the Hungarian uprising. But that background did mean I knew what these professors in Moscow University were talking about.

There must have been in my youth some kind of notion of respect for the working class or more disadvantaged people, and equality, all those things that are supposed to matter, and do, in a socialist society. I suppose Soviet Russia was much less strange to me than it would have been to a lot of people from Britain. I don't remember my parents ever discussing Lenin or Marx, it was more, I suppose, a general attitude and an absence of what you might get in a lot of middle-class English households - a sort of horror concerning Russia. I did also have a Latvian

nanny at one point in my childhood who was a refugee, and she told me lots of folk stories of forests and fairytale lands. From her and my mother I also heard about cruelties and invading armies.

I first went to Russia before I intended to do anthropology, on a camping holiday there as a student. We had a car and we drove from Finland. I remember disembarking at Leningrad and it did seem unlike any country in the West, even Finland; Leningrad and Vyborg immediately give an impression of incredible greyness and drabness; everybody dressed differently. The houses were dusty, concrete edifices; parts had been bombed during the War and not rebuilt; the food was rough and sour, so it did have a feeling of being another world.

You had to adjust all your sense of colour and what people's personalities might be like, the tone of life was utterly different. Russia isn't like that now but it was then. When I went to do fieldwork, I was in Moscow University, sharing accommodation with a Russian girl who I later realized had to report on what I was doing. I do remember the feeling that somehow everything was different, the smell, taste of food, clothes people wore, the books people were reading in the University, the way the professors behaved, was just another world,

I was initially planning to go to North Siberia to work on the Yakuts and I was very interested in the notion of these people who had arrived from the south. They were horse-breeding, Turkish language speakers, had come from way down in Central Asia and found their way up to this place, beyond the Arctic Circle. They were living as semi-nomads with herds of horses and cattle in an inconceivably harsh environment. I was very interested in how you could make a life in such a culture in a place that was so utterly difficult and dangerous.

But when I got to Moscow my Professor said that I couldn't go there; I don't know what the real reasons were but he said that it was not possible to travel there in spring and autumn because the land became a big swamp, and in the winter it was inconceivably cold - the coldest place in the world, which was true - and in the summer it was full of mosquitoes. So then I had to find somewhere else for my research; we had a bargaining session; my plan for work had to be inserted in the plan for their department as everything in Russia was done according to a plan.

It was decided that I would go to the Buryats as they were quite similar to the Yakuts, but living in the south of Siberia as oppose to the north. I then had many months in Moscow waiting to get permission to go and do fieldwork, about nine months. The whole period was important to my research as I spent nine or ten months reading about the Buryats, everything I could find. The result was that I now have a really good historical knowledge of them. I spent every day in the Lenin Library reading about them from dawn to dusk. It was incredibly useful, and I think living in Moscow was part of the research as I learnt a lot about Soviet life more generally.

I stayed two months in the field in Buryatia. It was not like the fieldwork that people do now as it was planned and had to be negotiated every step of the way. It wasn't just that I had to get permission from Moscow University to leave Moscow but had to get an invitation at the other end for them to receive me. I only did this

by sheer luck really as somebody from Buryatia came to Moscow and dropped in on my Professor who had become a good friend of mine. I managed to impress this woman as to what a nice, innocent person I was. She very kindly issued the invitation, otherwise I never would have been able to go. People really didn't do such things; no foreigner really went anywhere outside their designated city for research, and no British student had done anything like this before.

The field site was far away beyond Lake Baikal; when I got there I found they had a schedule for me, that I should go to this collective farm for one month and another for the second month, so I didn't have any choice about where I went. But it was fine - the whole area was interesting to me and I had many questions I longed to find an answer to. The Buryats had been well studied by Russians; one reason is that they lie on the direct route between Moscow and China and Mongolia. All the great Russian explorers, who were mostly army officers, would have to go to Buryatia, and they used the Buryats as assistants on these expeditions, so it was very well studied by Russians.

By the time I returned to Cambridge, Edmund had become my supervisor. He was wonderful; he used to say that I should not expect him to chase after me but he was there if I needed him. That was very good because it meant that the onus was on you, and you only got it touch with him when you had something to show him. He was very inspirational; I hero-worshipped him as a student. He was very engaging and had lots of ideas, and was intellectually demanding; he was quite tough-minded and you knew he would say what he thought.

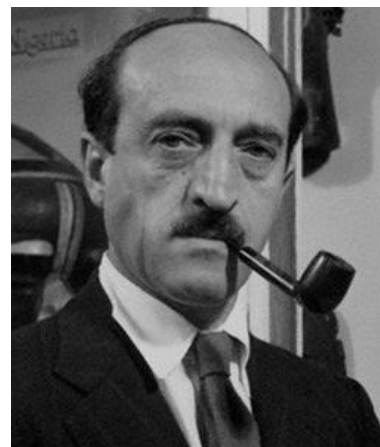
I did not find that he treated me differently because I was a woman; some of his students he thought of as his heirs, but I felt that he supported me and he seemed to respect the work that I had done. My thesis was on shamanism and was quite largely based on the historical work that I had done in Moscow before I went to the field, and on a few interviews on the theme that I managed to do there. It was quite historical, and had a semiotic and structuralist approach. I was very excited at that time, not just by Levi-Strauss, but particularly by Ronald Barthes and his ideas on semiology.

I did a study of shamanic drawings of the spirits using a semiological approach. The drawings were structurally organised and had meanings in plentiful stories, so it seemed to work quiet well. But I felt that there could be problems with the thesis theoretically which is why I never published it; one of the issues was pointed out to me at my PhD oral by Ray Abrahams, one of my examiners. He asked who made the drawings for whom, and I suddenly realized that that was the right question; that instead of taking them as a kind of system, like Levi-Strauss's myths, these had actually been made by individual people and kept in particular people's houses, and they had meanings for specific life events.

I hadn't been able to treat that dimension of them and I knew that I ideally should have done; when I began to think about the theoretical difficulties of that problem I put off re-writing the thesis as a book. Meanwhile I got involved in writing a book about the collective farms because that was what my fieldwork in Russia had actually been about, and I felt I had to write about it. Before publishing the book I went back to Buryatia a second time. In the intervening period, I went to Mongolia

(which is just over the border) and did some work there, and then went back to Buryatia. Thus the book was based on more than the two months fieldwork, but it was quite reliant on things like local newspapers, publications by Buryat writers, government documents, all sorts of other materials that at the time were not conventionally used in anthropology.

I do remember Meyer Fortes (right) saying when he saw some of this stuff that what I was doing was not anthropology at all, because he was used to something unadulterated, village fieldwork. This wasn't only that; I used local statistics and criticised them, looked at different official regulations, all sorts of things; my question was what is this strange way of living, of having a huge area the size of Yorkshire as one farm, with people scattered in several villages all working together collectively. How does it work, do people believe in it, what do they think they are doing, does the Soviet imprint work with people whose culture is quite different - Buddhist, Mongolian-speaking, very different from the Russians.



At that time in the late sixties and early seventies it was rather an effective system; this was the period of the thaw under Khrushchev, so it was after all the Stalinist repressions and incredibly difficult times, and they made it work more or less. One of the reasons why it worked for Buryats was because they had never had private property, so they weren't used to little farms, but did nomadize on a large scale and in some ways collectively. Collectivism fitted their way of life and they were being subsidized in various ways by the State.

By the late 1960s-70s they had a reasonable standard of living for Russia, no shortage of work, and most were trained in what they did. Every tractor driver had a grade and training appropriate to that, so did the shepherds and milkmaids; they had several schools, culture clubs and cinemas, a music school, canteens, a little world of its own that sort of worked. I went to two farms; in the early 1990s one of them was decollectivised; what happened was that the senior people running it took over bits of it, divided it up and turned it into a series of smaller farms, although still huge by British standards.

The other one didn't break up and as far as I know it is still going; they were both named after Karl Marx. I went to see the one that didn't break up not long ago. Since the fall of the Soviet Union they have set up a new statue of Karl Marx which sits at their boundary, and everybody who goes into the collective farm stops and make a little offering to him, a few drops of vodka, before they enter.

6. Writing

I enjoy writing but it is incredibly hard work; you have to concentrate so much that even physically it seems hard. At the end of writing for some hours you feel quite tired, at least I do, and also it is tough because you have to rewrite it all so often. I enjoy it a lot more than other academic tasks like sitting on committees or lecturing.

I take lots of notes and for big books I tend to index things. If I am working on a subject and have read all kinds of different materials on that subject I could locate them because in the index it would indicate where to look. For articles I don't do that. I tend to write in the mornings when I have more energy; I usually rewrite a number of times. I write on the computer and have never written long hand.

I can't remember any Eureka moments, though I have had lots of ideas that build up in some way. I don't ever write the same thing twice and like to do fresh things; I guess that my work seems all over the place to a lot of people. I have worked on politics, linguistic anthropology, art, cities, all kinds of things.

If I were to choose what I consider my more important works, one would be the Karl Marx Collective because it was my first book, and because I think it did try to get to grips with a very strange way of living. Another, 'Shamans and Elders' tries to understand shamanism from a Mongolian point of view. The third is the book I am working on now, and is about a Buddhist monastery in Inner Mongolia, in China, where I have been doing fieldwork for the last twelve years or so, accompanied by colleagues, and the book is being co-authored with a Mongolian, Hurelbaatar.

I like working with colleagues, and on the whole find it fun sharing ideas. There are some kinds of books which seem to need more than one person; the book I did with David Sneath was a bit like that as he had certain kinds of knowledge and abilities that were superior to mine, and I had other strengths. The same thing is true of the book I am writing now with Hurelbaatar. He would not want to write on anthropological theory, but to understand the underlying meaning of what people are saying, or the kind of ethics that lie behind a particular evaluation people give to things, such a book would be undoable without him. When writing the book with James Laidlaw on ritual we would exchange chapters and each tackle a particular bit. With this book I am writing it, but the conversation with Hurelbaatar is about what goes into it. Working with others in this way is reflected in the title of my Chair - collaborative anthropology.

7. Collaborative Anthropology

On the Mongolian Inner Asian Studies Unit which I set up, I didn't consciously set out to build an institution; the unit was really pushed at me by my co-author of the book on shamans, Urgunge Onon, who is Mongolian. He felt he was getting old, and the legacy of Owen Lattimore who had been his teacher and also mine, was being lost. There was nobody in this country who was studying Mongolian or promoting it, and it was my duty to do something about it.

Pushed by him, we did set up this unit; at that point, provided you had a rationale and wrote a convincing letter, Cambridge allowed one to set one up. It became an identifiable small group and grew from that. The idea behind it was not just that there needed to be some younger people who knew about that area of the world. Because the Mongols inhabit the middle of a huge land mass they are subject to many influences and very difficult to understand if you only know one bit of this.

To really understand Mongolia you have to know Chinese; to read the literature on Mongolia you have to read Russian. To know the history you have to know Turkish and Persian. A collaboration of lots of people in one unit is the only way that one can do a decent job on working in that bit of the world. I really do believe that. That was the idea behind having a unit, and it has been very successful. On language, I have Russian, Mongolian, and when I worked in Nepal I did know some Nepali. I also worked in India for a time and Nepali was pretty close.

I went to Rajasthan at a point when I was a Junior Lecturer, which in Cambridge was a turnover position. I wanted to stay in Cambridge and Jack Goody, who was Head of Department at the time, said that I could not get tenure if I was just going to study Mongolia as it was not a taught area. He suggested I study somewhere in South Asia, and I went to Nepal assuming it was in South Asia; I did fieldwork there, came back, and to my dismay Jack said that wasn't what he meant. At this point I gritted my teeth and went to India and worked on the Jains in Rajasthan, which I have never regretted.

I have supervised between forty and forty-five graduate students over the years. Much of the time there have been as many as ten at the same time. I was always very happy to work with graduate students and I think it is one of the most enjoyable things I have done with my life. I have been blessed with some wonderful students, so many brilliant people, almost none have I not actually enjoyed supervising. Quite a few worked in India; the work I did on the Jains resulted in several people working there. I had a few students from Korea, quite a lot on various parts of Russia, and more recently I had a batch of people coming from Denmark, most of whom are now teaching there. One of them worked in Cuba, and three in Mongolia.

I adopt Edmund's slightly hands-off technique of not trying to impose too much, being available, and putting in the right word at a certain moment about something exciting a student could read, but really leaving it to them, making clear that they must do it. This seems to result in people growing in their work, and finding parts of themselves they hadn't really quite expected; also identifying with their own work because it is all theirs, not me who has pushed it into them. They have a real sense

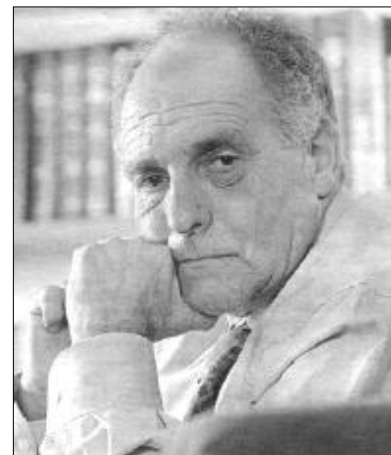
of owning that work and being the author of something new. It sometimes takes a long time because if you are not pushing people they work at their own pace. There is no usual time, some of them whizz through in three or four years, and some take eight. I suspect the average is five years

When I was younger, I particularly enjoyed undergraduate supervisions, and did a lot of it; in those days I felt instinctively on the same wave length as the students, but I was still supervising last year and enjoyed it. I have to admit I don't really enjoy lecturing. I don't like the mode of just standing up with only one person talking at a room full of people for nearly an hour. The way it is in Cambridge is extremely concentrated, you have got to get information over and the students want it to be like that, so there isn't much option for slowing down or changing the format to be more conversational.

I have tried different ways of teaching; I once tried debates, also when I was lecturing on barter, getting them to play a game, bartering in little groups, but it all took too long and time whizzed by and they didn't think they had learnt anything. You are stuck with the lecture format and I can't say I really enjoy it. I do like teaching seminars and have done MPhil seminar teaching for practically my whole career, often with a colleague which is helpful. The difficult thing in that sort of seminar is that a lot of information has to be imparted, but the students come from very different backgrounds, some very knowledgeable, some knowing practically nothing about anthropology. So it is helpful to have two people teaching.

The main thing is to try to engender a discussion which will make them interested and they take part in; I was Head of Department for four years; I did enjoy it though it was a challenge as I suddenly felt responsible for the whole place, from loo paper to the appointment of the next readership, what's in the syllabus to the physical plant in the department. I enjoyed trying to keep that going and improve it as best I could.

Ernest Gellner (right) was Head of Department for some time; he was an exciting thinker, a philosopher and not just an anthropologist. I think he had that way of sharpening ideas and focussing on things. A lot of anthropology is quite discursive and descriptive, and he was analytical and certainly an ethical thinker about all these issues. I think it did influence me a lot, not that I ever wrote that way. I did meet Clifford Geertz and admired his work, but was not much influenced by it. More recently I have been influenced by Bruno Latour. I didn't like his work for a long time, and even now don't think it is the answer to everything, but, a bit like with Ernest, I really appreciate that this is a quite grand systematic mind. He has a way of looking at the world and is unafraid to say so; we have to be logical in those ways and his is exciting work.

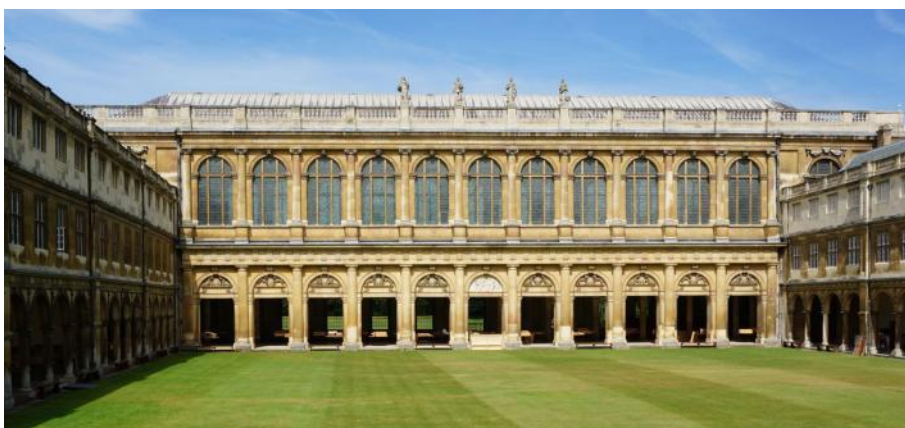


8. King's and Trinity



King's College Cambridge.

As a Fellow of King's and wife of the Master of Trinity, I see these as very different colleges. They are both part of the old Cambridge College system, but in terms of atmosphere they are different. My problem in really answering the question is that I don't have the same relation to them because I am a Fellow of King's so am inside it. That is like being in a very large family, with people just arriving, but others who have retired and are still part of King's.



Wren Library, Trinity College Cambridge.

I think Trinity is also like that but I am not part of it; the wife of the Master isn't a Fellow; I do have dining rights but it is pretty clear that one is not supposed to exercise them as though you were a member of the College. My role there is very different and is to assist Martin in what he does as Master. A lot of it is quite official, entertaining people or meeting potential sponsors and donors, going to official occasions, so I don't know the inside of Trinity as I do King's.

However the general feeling is that Trinity has its own atmosphere. It is a very solid place; its motto is *semper eadem*, always the same, so it is happy to go on doing things and you have to have an unbelievably good reason to change anything, whereas I don't think King's has ever been like that.

I was very much tempted to go to University College London a few years ago; I didn't, partly because Martin is here and it would have made life more difficult, but

also because Marilyn Strathern, who was Head of Department at the time, persuaded me to stay in Cambridge. I think I had thought it was time for a change but at that point there were not many people about my age in the department in my position, and I think she felt she needed another relatively senior person around, so I stayed. I have been happy in Cambridge; I think it is important from my point of view to have a place that you know really well if you are going to a lot of different countries and having immense networks in many places where you are unfamiliar and having to find your way. It is good to be able to retreat to somewhere where you know practically every paving stone.
