

***Village on the Border*, anthropology at the crossroads: the significance of a classic British ethnography**

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Abstract

Village on the Border was the seminal anthropological study of a mainland British rural community. It was written and published during a period of unsurpassed scholarship and creativity in British social science. To explain the impact it had on social anthropology, British studies and public discourse at the time, I look at the influences on Ronnie Frankenberg and his work of the then state of social anthropology; of the particular academic environment in which he was trained and worked; and of his personal background and political convictions. This analysis shows that although the book clearly bears particular historical and intellectual influences, it was explicitly set within *comparative* ethnographic frameworks, and in due course greatly influenced work elsewhere. Both methodologically and substantively, it should be seen as a significant contribution to the comparative study of local-level politics, gender relations and the role of the 'stranger', as well as the authentic origin of modern anthropological studies of rural Britain.

Initial considerations

The fifty plus years of Ronnie Frankenberg's academic career cover about two-thirds of the period in which social anthropology has been an established and distinctive discipline in British universities. During this period like all of the humane sciences it has obviously undergone very significant shifts of paradigm and fashion; and there have been major changes in the orientation of the subject. During Ronnie's half century as a published scholar, anthropology first struggled to find a distinctive posture appropriate to the new post-colonial era; and then charted a path for itself and for cognate disciplines in the humanities and social sciences through the mush of post-modernism, post-structuralism and critical theory of one kind or another. Obviously his own interests and theoretical positions have changed substantially over this period. He produced genuinely seminal work both in the anthropology of locality in general, and of Britain in particular, and in the rapidly burgeoning field of medical anthropology. But throughout it all, he has remained one of the increasingly rare anthropologists who are still inclined and able to think

through and with the corpus of comparative ethnography – the tradition in which he was trained at Manchester – and has applied the same disciplines of meticulous scholarship and accessible writing to all of his varied interests.

My subject in this article is his first book, *Village on the Border*, the work which formed the basis of his academic reputation, and which has been a constant point of reference in my own anthropological career.¹ I went to Newfoundland in 1968 to do research on political culture and development. I had not received any fieldwork training, and had only an unsystematic and eccentrically eclectic knowledge of the ethnographic literature. Within a week of my arrival at the Memorial University of Newfoundland, I was despatched to the field by my supervisor, Robert Paine, with a copy of *Village* in my suitcase, and an instruction not to return until I was able to write something similarly substantial. By rights, I should still be there. I have taught the book ever since to my postgraduate students. It is one of those rare books which rewards regular re-reading with new insights. Although it is slight in length, it was unquestionably crucial to the development of an anthropology of Britain.

When Ronnie came in to social anthropology as a postgraduate student, there was still a Durkheimian slant to the subject, a view that there were social facts in the world which could be elicited by the use of sufficiently rigorous methodology and scholarship. The commitment of (the then very small number of) professional anthropologists to meticulous and exhaustively documented fieldwork can be seen retrospectively at least in part as a deliberate counterweight to the essentially personal nature of ethnographic research, the primary tool of which was the ethnographer. Of course this was soon to lead to profound philosophical scepticism about the plausibility of the anthropological project (Winch, 1958); and, later, as in sociology, to the widespread rejection of positivism and the acknowledgement of the virtuous complexities of 'interpretive' research and reflexive writing. But this also means that an appreciation of the published anthropology of this period entails some understanding of its highly personalised character; and requires us to pay attention to the personal characteristics of and influences on the anthropologist which were otherwise masked by the aspiration to scientific objectivity and detachment.

I think there are three characteristic and mutually implicated features of Ronnie Frankenberg the person which inform his anthropology. First, he is an intellectual – certainly *my* idea of an intellectual. He is astonishingly widely-read, has a remarkable memory, an extraordinary scholarly range; and his distinctive skill is to bring this amazingly catholic knowledge to bear on any particular issue. You may be discussing the role of the stranger in Welsh village society, or some intriguing aspect of a non-western medical practice, or Confucianism; and Ronnie's exegesis will move seamlessly among the Talmud, Freud, Harold Nicholson's diaries, the Eighteenth Brumaire, and C.P. Snow's novels, all to a point. The breadth of his learning was established in his formative years. He read natural sciences with a view to studying medicine, and only later turned to anthropology. For an anthropologist undertaking pioneering work on Britain, for which there was no specialist ethnographic

literature to serve as a baseline and comparative reference, his intellectual compass and range was invaluable. In these far more specialised times, it would be unusual, if exceptionally gratifying, to encounter a young anthropologist able to move with sophistication across such diverse bodies of ethnographic knowledge. Indeed, it has sadly become intellectually unfashionable.

Secondly, he is Jewish; was raised in a family steeped in Jewish culture and learning, and his father immigrated to England from Poland. Much (perhaps too much) has been written about the anthropologist/ethnographer as 'professional stranger'. The significance of their 'outsiderhood' to so many of Ronnie Frankenberg's and the immediately preceding and succeeding generations of anthropologists has often been noted, and should still not be overlooked. Although lapsed from religious practice as a young man, Ronnie nevertheless retained an enduring interest in Judaism and in the socialist influences on the early European Zionist movement. Jewish people growing up in Britain between the Wars, and during and immediately after the Second War could hardly fail to be conscious of their distinctiveness and identification as 'outsiders' to some degree. I think it is interesting that Frankenberg *qua* anthropologist became particularly engaged by the role of the 'stranger' in close-knit societies.

Third, he is a socialist, with an extensive knowledge of Marxist and Marxian literature. He was nurtured as an anthropologist in Manchester within a close-knit school, for many of whose most prominent members – including Max Gluckman, Victor Turner and Peter Worsley – the Soviet Union's repression of the Hungarian revolution in 1956 was a profound shock and triggered their break from the Communist Party which Ronnie himself joined in the early 1950's. The trauma of this event for the active members of the Left in Britain cannot be overstated. Like Peter Worsley, who had been refused permission by the Australian government to work in New Guinea (leading him instead to his outstanding research on Groot Eylandt Aborigines), Ronnie had been refused entry by the colonial authorities both to Northern Rhodesia and to St Vincent in the West Indies, and he was sent home – which was why he eventually went to do research in Wales. Like Peter, Ronnie remained both a scholar of socialism and an activist in various left causes, and they share an enduring idealism which may seem anachronistic, even eccentric, to later and more detached generations. They were both early and enthusiastic visitors to China when the People's Republic began to admit academic tourists in the mid-1970's.

Turner filled the ideological void in his life left by his departure from the CP by becoming a professing, committed Catholic. Endless stories about Max Gluckman portray him as trying on postures, rather as if he treated life as a continuous subject for participant observation. Worsley, one of the most open-minded of senior social scientists, moved from one enthusiasm to another. Ronnie has always seemed to me different. As the author of *Village*, he could not reasonably be accused of having worn his ideological heart on his sleeve. But it is striking that as an ethnographer working in rural and predominantly

agricultural north Wales in the early 1950's, he focused on conflict, industrial decline and opposed class interests. My sense of him is that he was not again to be tempted by a revealed or soon-to-be-revealed truth, but would quietly search out all the available literature on a given topic, would read and digest it all, and then store it away. He seems never to have felt the need to try to make authoritative, far less definitive statements. His scholarship is certainly not detached; but it is unassuming, amused, inclusive, Forster-ish in its concern to make connections. It is as if having once had his ideological fingers burned, he has since been reluctant to accept anything more than the provisionality of any position. Although a deeply serious scholar, his wit and mischievous sense of humour bubbles away continuously, and defines his approach to academic discussion and argument, as I suspect it did to his teaching.

***Village*: a classic**

Village on the Border was Ronnie's first, and remains his best known book, and it is a remarkable piece of work for a young scholar. He was only twenty eight when it was published; but it is the product of a mature mind. It was seminal for qualitative studies of rural Britain, indeed of rural and marginal areas of the northern industrialised world. It was the outcome of ethnographic research conducted with all the rigour of modern anthropology, and tested at and through the Manchester seminar against the comparativism which provided its basic discipline.² Frankenberg's mentors and peers had worked in central and southern Africa, on the African copperbelt, in India, the Middle East and north Africa, and he was required to be fully literate in their scholarly traditions.

Village was published in 1957, an *annus mirabilis* for British (and especially Manchester) anthropology, sociology and social history. Apart from *Village*, 1957 saw the publication of Worsley's classic, *The Trumpet Shall Sound*; Nadel's *Theory of Social Structure*, Firth's *Man and Culture*, Freddie Bailey's *Caste and the Economic Frontier*, Turner's *Schism and Continuity in an African Society*, Wilmott & Young's *Family and Kinship in East London*, Bott's *Family and Social Network*; Bohannan's *Justice and judgement among the Tiv*, Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* and Norman Cohn's *Pursuit of the Millenium*. Gluckman was in the full flow of the most productive period of his career. The previous year had borne Evans-Pritchard's *Nuer Religion*; C. Wright Mills's *The Power Elite*, Parsons and Smelser's *Economy and Society*, Clyde Mitchell's *Yao Village and The Kalela Dance*; and Firth's *Middle Class Families* and *Two Studies of Kinship in London*. It was an astonishing period, a real ferment of ideas, a moment of dynamism the like of which has not since recurred in British social science. It was a time of discovery, when the seminar room must have fizzed with excitement.

But it was not to last, not in anthropology anyway. By 1966, Peter Worsley was warning of 'the end of anthropology', if the subject did not lose its obses-

sion with the particularistic and relativistic study of exotic, 'pre-modern' societies for its own sake, and its squeamishness about general theory. For some years following his *Communities in Britain* (1969), Ronnie published relatively little. He went to Zambia, and began to develop the next major theme of his life's work: in medical anthropology. He and Worsley both moved to Chairs in Sociology; although both were later to return to social anthropology.³

Village was and remains an authentic classic. It is still required reading for anyone seriously interested in the anthropology of the British Isles. It made an essential contribution to anthropology's enduring concern with 'the stranger'; and as a study of the rootedness of local-level politics in ordinary social interaction, it was a crucial precursor of an entire tradition in political anthropology. Through the eyes of a reader in 2005, it may not be immediately obvious why *Village* made such an impact nearly fifty years previously. Ronnie did not make any claim in the text regarding its theoretical originality; and, remarkably, there is no explicit argument in it about the appropriateness of applying anthropology, its methodology and its comparative perspectives to contemporary Britain. The book was written as if there was nothing unusual and notable about the pioneering research on which it was based. Unlike later authors who he influenced, myself included, Frankenberg did not appear to have felt the need to defend to other anthropologists the nature of his work; nor even to go very far in arguing with sceptical social scientists for the distinctive posture and potential of anthropology in revealing the fabric and complexity of contemporary British society. Apart from his lack of presumption on which I commented above, I think this may indicate the unique character of Manchester social science at that time, and the central position which Gluckman had carved out both personally and for the subject among his most influential Manchester peers, including W.J.M. Mackenzie, Dorothy Emmett, Michael Polanyi, Arthur Lewis and Ely Devons. They clearly came to regard anthropology as fully pertinent to their own varied interests. It would hardly be surprising, therefore, that a young scholar reared academically in their collective seminar came to share their view.

Notwithstanding the interest in contemporary Britain which was taken by prominent anthropologists such as Gluckman himself, Firth, Littlejohn and Audrey Richards, anthropological studies of Britain were very soon afterwards to become regarded within the discipline generally in the UK as marginal, even as inappropriate. I do not think we need to pause over the reasons for this, beyond noting that they were coincident with the kind of intellectual myopia and introversion to which Worsley and Laura Nader (1972) would shortly draw attention, and which, during the late 1970's and 1980's were to see social anthropology departments contract significantly within British universities, prior to the discipline's later rebirth in the vanguard of interpretive, post-structural studies in the humanities and social sciences. British social anthropologists – unlike their peers in France, Norway, Spain and Canada – were uninterested in their own or other industrialised societies, and regarded

research on them as the business of sociologists.⁴ Between the publication of *Village* in 1957, and the inception of my own work in Shetland fifteen years later, no more than a handful of major studies within the British Isles by British anthropologists came to fruition (notably those by Robin Fox on Tory Island, Jimmy Littlejohn in the Borders, and Rosemary Harris in Northern Ireland). Further, within contemporary sociology, ethnographies of localities, especially of rural localities, came to be categorised rather perjoratively as ‘community studies’ which were subjected to a torrent of largely misconceived and ideological criticism which I have discussed elsewhere (see Cohen, 1985). Certainly so far as *Village* is concerned, this critique was unwarranted, not least because of the manifest relationship of Frankenberg’s anthropology, like that of his mentors, to wider social and theoretical concerns.⁵

At the core of his analysis of Pentreidiwaith, a remote and declining North Wales valley community divided by language, denomination, gender and kinship, was class. The key discriminant between the relatively powerless and egalitarian village men – who were forced to travel long distances to work outside the village and the valley – and those they believed to occupy positions of power and authority was economic power and all that went with it. This was not a restatement of the more stereotypical rural hierarchies of landowners and the rest, or even of a petty squirearchy. Rather, on the one side were self-employed businessmen, salaried executives and white-collar employees; on the other were the wage labourers. The former were regarded as outsiders, a characterisation underlined by the prevalence among them of English as their first or sole language; on the other were the villagers (‘insiders’), most of whom spoke Welsh as their first language. Interestingly, this latter group might include the doctor (if he was local) and the Baptist (‘Chapel’) minister. It was likely to exclude the teachers and the Anglican (‘Church’) minister (although the incumbent in Ronnie’s time there was a Welsh-speaker).

Far from treating Pentreidiwaith as a social and cultural isolate (which was the burden of much of the critique of community studies), Frankenberg clearly and explicitly explained its dominant social configurations in terms of social and economic change in Britain as a whole, as it affected, for example, agriculture and slate quarrying. Moreover, with an intriguing prescience of the feminist enlightenment which would make itself felt twenty years later, he also identified gender as a key axis of local political action, cutting across the supposedly shared interests of marriage and kinship.

The justification for *Village*, if any was needed, was identical to the justification then current at Manchester for anthropological ethnography in general, and, for what would become known as ‘situational analysis’ in particular. It was, firstly, that the focus of attention was on *process*, rather than the individuals concerned. Second, that social processes, regarded then within anthropology as comparable and generalisable, had to be seen within their *structural* contexts. Much of the thrust of Manchester anthropology was on the processes

through which and by means of which people attempted to manipulate social structures, whether of law (Gluckman), kinship (Peters), politics (*omnes*, but perhaps most interestingly Bailey); ritual (Turner), economics (Watson), identity and ethnicity (Mitchell, Epstein), and belief (Worsley). *Village* sat plumb in the middle of this tradition. Frankenberg was later to argue (1963 [1989]) that the ethnographic study of people in 'small' social situations enables one to observe how people interact within society and are affected by much wider social processes – an argument Geertz much later pithily expressed as 'anthropologists don't study villages: they study in villages'.

What happened in Pentrediwaith?

The Pentrediwaith of Frankenberg's account was a fractious place. Its communal life was a series of conflicts which could be seen as resolving into momentary equilibria which then fuelled further conflict. This was, of course, Gluckmanian orthodoxy, but it was much more than this. The ethnographic heart of the book is a blow-by-blow account of successive wrangles, shifting alliances and deep-seated feuds within the (all-male) football club committee, the (almost all female) football supporters club and the carnival committee. Read superficially, it portrays a society so riven by squabbles, jealousies and parochial concerns as to be almost comical. But there is clearly such immense effort and conviction invested in this petty strife that you have to wonder if this village is pathological – or might this inclination to conflict be made understandable by the circumstances that surround it? For Frankenberg, there is nothing pathological about it. First, this is the stuff of local politics; and, indeed, it provides the sentiment with which people approach their higher Politics. Secondly, it *is* all understandable in light of the wider power structure and political economy of which rural North Wales is an inherent, if geographically peripheral part. The traditional economic base of Pentrediwaith was broken. The slate quarries were no longer capable of generating significant employment; agriculture was steadily becoming more capital-intensive, and farms were being bought up by outsiders; and the village men now had to find employment outside the village. Outsiders were more numerous in the locality than previously. This demographic change and the requirement for mobility to which the local working population was subject was threatening the long-term security of Welsh as the first language, a threat made all the more potent by the early spread of television. Moreover, Britain was beginning to emerge from the straitened economic conditions of the early post-War period, and this must have heightened the sense of marginality, perhaps of relative deprivation in the valley.

The pervasive sentiment in Wales of domination by England would have added to the fraught atmosphere of a community which felt itself to be under pressure. Indeed, in a reflective essay written to accompany the second edition of *Village*, Frankenberg recounts a heated exchange in seminar with Emrys

Peters⁶ in which Ronnie, again presaging much later work, described the England-Wales relationship as one of colonial domination. '...Peters, Welshest of the Welsh . . . averred that he didn't feel like a colonial. I retorted that that was unsurprising for a socially climbing, detribalized, petty bourgeois national and class traitor' (Frankenberg, 1989: 180–81).⁷ And on top of all this was the tension which flows from sectarianism among a small and isolated population. While the principal line of schism was between Anglicans and the much larger number of 'Chapel folk', the latter included Baptists, Scots Baptists, Calvinist Methodists and Wesleyan Methodists. People's social activities, even their choice of local shops to patronise was influenced by their religious affiliation, which was also reflected in their first language.

One doesn't have to accept the class and colonialism axes of Frankenberg's analysis in order to recognise that social relations in Pentredwiwaith might very well have been pretty adversarial. Against this background, he made three important observations which resonate powerfully through the comparative ethnographic literature. The first was that these cleavages are resolved or are muted when the community feels itself threatened from outside or by outsiders. When the enemy is at the gates, the gates clang shut. Anthropologists had been familiar with this phenomenon since Evans-Pritchard (1940) described it among the Nuer. It was later to become a signature theme of Manchester anthropology (see Werbner, 1984) observed in societies as disparate as those of the Bedouin (Peters, 1967), the Ndembu (Turner, 1957); and even much later, and in rather different form, Whalsay, Shetland (Cohen, 1987).

Secondly, contiguous communities, or groups who are most like each other are also those most inclined to exaggerate and to cherish their differences from each other. This was powerfully illustrated in Pitt-Rivers's *People of the Sierra* (1954), and it is apparent throughout *Village* in the complex ways in which Pentredwiwaith groups distinguish themselves from each other.

And following from both of these foregoing matters was the significance of the 'stranger' or the 'outsider'. The stranger is a significant figure in folklore and literature across the world. The sociological significance of strangerhood had been noted by Simmel. But Frankenberg drew particular attention to the use made of strangers or outsiders in communities whose own frail social relationships made it impolitic for insiders to assume roles which would render them vulnerable to blame or to political exposure. When I was doing research in Newfoundland in the late 1960's, discussion at our anthropology seminars frequently focused on the phenomenon we knew as 'the foolish stranger', the outsider who was lumbered with official roles in community organisations. This person was foolish because, as Frankenberg noted with respect to Pentredwiwaith, outsiders could be made to take the blame when events turned out badly, without local people having to bear the heavy social cost of responsibility. Moreover, as I found in my own work on Springdale (Cohen, 1975), they also did not need to be accorded the credit if things went well, because they would be depicted as having acted as the mere creatures

of sage insiders. Ronnie was our inspiration in these discussions, and *Village* was our source.⁸

In Pentrediwaith, the tactic of exploiting 'strangers' went deep. Frankenberg made clear that outsiderhood could be a relative rather than an absolute matter; and that the individual who was outsider to one group or to one campaign might also be core to another. The most obvious example of this was the perennial use of prominent local men to chair the otherwise all-women football supporters' club. Moreover, Frankenberg's appraisal of his own activity in Pentrediwaith in this regard – as an official of the football club, and acting chairman of the carnival committee – was notable both as a then still rare acknowledgement of the anthropologist's active presence in the field, and as an anticipation by twenty years of the fashion for anthropological reflexivity. At the time of his fieldwork, Pentrediwaith was a village in decline. In such circumstances, leadership roles become unattractive because the chances of succeeding in them seem slight: the willing leader is on a hiding to nothing. Frankenberg describes the difficulty of recruiting members to the football club committee, partly due to the unappealing nature of the tasks which are undertaken by members, not the least of which was team selection. The social and political pitfalls of this responsibility are obvious in a community where memories are long (and often inaccurate) and conflict and factionalism are rife. Moreover, the team's record during the 1953 season suggests that local football was yet another cause, as well as a symptom of depression and deteriorating morale. The disputes in and around the club made it an apposite candidate for the application of the 'extended case method'; but the club's apparently inexorable failure and decline also seems to stand for Pentrediwaith itself.

Village: a contemporary study

In an essay written to accompany the publication of the second edition of *Village* in 1989, Frankenberg reflected on some of the influences apparent in the original study. He commented in particular on contemporary Manchester anthropology and anthropologists, both with regard to some of their working practices and their politics; on the fact that the fieldwork was done in coronation year (1953); and on the attention the book received when it was originally published in 1957. Of the first of these three matters, the influence of Manchester on *Village* is unmistakable.⁹ Ronnie has remarked repeatedly on the intellectual debt he owed to Gluckman generally; and, in particular, to his *Analysis of a Social Situation in Modern Zululand*,¹⁰ a work originally published during the Second War as three papers in *Bantu Studies*, and then republished in 1958 by the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute. Gluckman's method in *Analysis* provided Frankenberg with a compelling model which is manifest in *Village*. Gluckman asserted the validity of relating the detailed ethnography of contained, microsocial situations to the organising principles of the

macrosocial structure. We do not need to dwell here on the methodological and theoretical problems of this approach. Suffice it to say that this was indeed both the method and the justification that Frankenberg used in *Village*, and which is most obviously apparent in the chapter on the football club. The 'extended case' or 'situational analysis' method was used widely by many Manchester anthropologists, with different degrees of sophistication and qualification, and was advocated and defended by contributors (most explicitly, by van Velsen, 1967) to A.L. Epstein's edited Manchester symposium, *The Craft of Social Anthropology* (1967). What I find particularly interesting historically about Frankenberg's use of it in *Village* was the implicit proposition that the same method that had been developed for the study of industrialising or yet-to-be industrialised societies of central and southern Africa could be applied to the already de-industrialising context of North Wales. I don't remember having discussed this specifically with Frankenberg; but I am certain that it was deliberate and considered.

Apart from the work of Arensberg and Kimball in the west of Ireland, there had been very little published anthropological research in the British Isles. The two notable village studies were by social geographers, Alwyn Rees's study of Llanfihangel (1950) and Williams's work in Gosforth (1957). Nothing had yet come from Erving Goffman's Ph.D research in Shetland. With the exception of the Irish studies, there really was very little published ethnographic literature to speak of on the British Isles; and, indeed, it would remain a slight and very patchy body of work until well into the 1980's. I have made clear elsewhere my view that the reasons for this neglect did no credit to contemporary anthropologists, and a determined effort was needed to remedy it. Even now, when anthropologists are no longer required to defend the integrity of conducting their research in Britain, we lack the deliberately constructed comparative literature which characterised and facilitated the development of ethnographic area specialisms elsewhere.¹¹ All of this justifies the description of *Village* as a genuinely pioneering study, carried out with the extreme difficulty for an anthropologist which arises from the virtual absence of any comparative points of reference other than those drawn from very different cultures.

As I mentioned above, Frankenberg refrained from engaging in any argument in *Village* about the novelty or propriety of doing anthropological research in Wales; and, therefore, was silent on the ground-breaking nature of his work. I would guess that this was the approach strongly recommended by Gluckman. But if the implicit proposition was that doing such research was unproblematic, it would also follow that using theoretical frameworks and methods developed from the study of other cultures would similarly have to be regarded as uncontentious; and that is certainly the sense one gets from reading *Village* now. Further, as a Marxist, Frankenberg, like Gluckman, would have been inclined to see rural Wales and central southern Africa as differing not in kind but only in their respective stages of development along a historical continuum; and, therefore, as properly comparable. Whether for

this reason or because of the lack of other British and European studies, the works which are cited in *Village* are the classic studies of Azande, Tallensi, Borotse, Plateau Tonga, and so on.

The fieldwork was conducted during 1953. In June of that year, the Queen was crowned in a celebration widely regarded at the time as marking the end of post-War austerity. A famous debate took place in the pages of this journal between, in the pink-ish corner, Ed Shils and Michael Young (1953); and, in the definitely red corner, Norman Birnbaum (1955). Shils and Young produced a strongly Durkheimian analysis both of the coronation ceremony itself and of the festivities which attended it, stressing their efficacy both as expressions and instruments of social solidarity. Birnbaum responded characteristically with a Marxist critique, arguing that the ceremony and the street parties were instruments of false consciousness to mask the enduring class conflict in Britain. Frankenberg's research and writing was coincident with this debate, which captured the attention of British sociologists at the time – and Edward Shils was a regular visitor to the Manchester seminar. Although he did not refer to it in the text of *Village*, Frankenberg's account of conflict and solidarity in Pentrediwaith could be read as a comment on these contending positions, which were echoed throughout British sociology as it came to be polarised between the grand theories of (structural) functionalism and Marxism. On the one hand, the community appeared to be, and actually was riven by conflict; on the other, it was capable of contriving at least the appearance of unity when confronted by the common threat of outsiders.

The Shils-Young/Birnbaum debate was not just a matter of academic entertainment. Not surprisingly, the media were full of discussion about the nature of British society at such a notable moment, and it would have been bizarre indeed if this had not informed Frankenberg's approach to the Pentrediwaith study.

It may also explain why on publication *Village* was so widely reviewed and discussed well beyond the conventional academic journals. It engaged the attention of C.P. Snow, was reviewed in the *Spectator* and, by Richard Hoggart in *The New Statesman*, serialised in *The Western Mail*, was the subject of a critical panel discussion on BBC radio (see Frankenberg, 1989), and was reported on Granada TV. It has to be remembered that until devolution finally materialised at the very end of the twentieth century, the United Kingdom was centralised to an extent unusual throughout the western industrialised world. It was a unitary state, with a polity, economy and media tightly focused on and controlled from London. Broadcasting was largely still in the hands of a national monopoly, commercial television having been introduced only in 1956, and was so London-centred that the BBC would not employ news-readers with 'local' accents. No other country in the democratic world had such a powerful national press. A consequence of all this was massive ignorance about and indifference towards the country beyond the so-called 'home counties', which was quaintly referred to as 'the provinces'. The provinces were liable to be treated in the national media in terms of simple (and often

simple-minded) stereotypes, or as problems for London to resolve (or ignore). Now here was an academic with a Cambridge degree trying to peel the wrappings off a remote North Wales community, and revealing it as a more complex organism than simple, provincial localities were supposed by metropolitan sophisticates to be. I may overstate this, but probably not excessively.

One of the great virtues of Manchester anthropology was precisely that it did not buy uncritically into the glib dichotomy of simple and complex societies that was so apparent in contemporary social science. Indeed, the societies they studied – in east, west and southern Africa, the Middle East, India – were revealed in fine ethnographic detail as enormously complex. This is yet another reason why Frankenberg's field would not have been regarded as different in kind; and, indeed, he felt that the constraints of fieldwork in Pentredeu did not permit him, unlike his peers and seniors elsewhere in the anthropological world, the kind of access needed to fully appreciate its complexity. Yet, he was revealing to the British chattering class a view of rural Britain of which they were not otherwise aware; namely, that it contained people with personalities, frailties, tensions and relationships every bit as complex as their own.

Unlike Arensberg and Kimball who characterised their field in County Clare as a 'peasant society' and thereby implied its differentiation from the western industrialised world, Frankenberg tacitly and correctly gave us Pentredeu as an integral part of modern Britain. It was by this means that he really opened up the issue of the need for intensive anthropological studies within Britain. Sociologists responded with a series of celebrated community studies. Anthropologists were much more reserved. It is easy to caricature the causes of this reticence or distaste, and difficult to be polite about it. Gluckman remained convinced of the need for such work, and of its academic integrity, but eventually conceded that it should belong to the sociological section of his own department. At Oxford, Cambridge and the LSE, the three leading graduate schools in British social anthropology, there would be few doctoral theses based on British studies until the mid-1970's.¹² The dominant view was that anthropology was the study of 'other cultures',¹³ where a key criterion of otherness was a different, preferably *very* different language. There was the sense that working 'at home' was somehow easy. It took many years to dispel this notion, and to undermine the view, in which they were themselves complicit (eg Jackson, 1987) that anthropologists at work could be conceptually and culturally 'at home'. In 1978 when I began to put together a symposium on contemporary ethnographic work on the rural British Isles, eventually published in 1982 as *Belonging*, I had great difficulty in finding enough appropriate material, although the situation changed rapidly thereafter, largely through my own students, the group supervised by Edwin Ardener at Oxford (which was later to include one of the recent editors of this journal), and a slight easing of the prejudice at Cambridge. Well in to the 1990's, publishers remained extremely reluctant to publish anthropological monographs on Britain. Happily, the subject has matured, and anthropolo-

gists are now properly and usefully at work in central institutions of British society, rather than just in its remoter locations.

Conclusion

In concluding, I return to two issues with which I began: the historical circumstances in which Ronnie undertook his groundbreaking work; and the significance of his own outsiderhood for the substance of the work. In 1953, Britain had been irrevocably changed by the War and its economic consequences; and then by six years of a Labour government that had taken the basic public services and primary industries into public ownership, and had begun the inexorable process of de-colonisation which would be virtually completed over the next dozen years. Politically, the country was polarised, between a backward-looking Conservative Party, and a rather backward-looking and deeply divided Labour Party, leaving left-wing intellectuals frustrated and without an obvious home in mainstream politics. They were, of course, profoundly engaged with and expert on colonial societies, but their relationships with the colonial authorities were very different than they had been before and during the War. The very nature of their work brought them into close contact (and, in many cases, sympathy) with people who were significant in the struggle for independence. Moreover, their expert knowledge of these societies at grass roots levels equipped them to challenge the simplifications, generalisations and prejudices of the colonial administrations and of the British Government itself. It was not just the pith-helmeted, gin-quaffing colonial administrators of the popular stereotype who didn't want Ronnie on their patches: he recalls that he was also *persona non grata* with Lord Stopford, the Vice-Chancellor of Manchester University, simply because he was politically controversial (Frankenberg, 1989).

The political intelligence of these academics was obviously not limited to the societies in which they did their research; but it is clear that, among anthropologists generally, there was great uncertainty about how and whether to apply their expertise to Britain. Gluckman and Firth, as different as individuals as they were in their respective anthropologies, were both clear that Britain was a 'legitimate' and important field. Firth's influence on the next generation of scholars to work in Britain was significant – on, for example, Kenneth Little, Jimmy Littlejohn, Robin Fox, Sandra Wallman and Isobel Emmett – but in this particular regard, his interests did not become embedded in LSE anthropology. There, as at Manchester, people who wanted to do research in Britain and elsewhere in the developed world felt the need to migrate to sociology departments and positions, or to other social science niches. The list is impressive, and for just for these two institutions it includes Peter Worsley, John Barnes, Ronnie Frankenberg, Bill Watson, Clyde Mitchell, Tom Lupton, Percy Cohen, Isobel Emmett, Derek Allcorn and, arguably, Valdo Pons.¹⁴ Most of these remained closely involved with anthro-

polology, and some came back institutionally to the subject; although, as Ronnie insisted to me, this was more a matter of anthropology's maturation than of any change of mind on their part.¹⁵

Ronnie's forced turn to research in Wales may have been accidental; but it was timely for the discipline, and would have been fully consistent with his (and with Gluckman's) political inclinations, even though he may have regretted it at the time. His analysis was not at all politically heavy-handed, but it resonated with the underlying themes of conflict, economic and political decline, and a sense of impotence, even paralysis, with regard to Pentredeith people's sense of their capacity to affect the destiny of their own community.

He went on to do further research and then to employment as a union official in Wales, before returning to Manchester (post-Stopford) and to other things. But despite the important lead he had given, it was to be a long time before there was any momentum in British studies in anthropology; and then it was in the context of the subject's decline and threatened demise (see Spencer, 2000). The cost of this neglect went far beyond anthropology itself, and, arguably, is apparent in key areas of public policy, not least with respect to immigration, race and ethnic relations; rural society; and the development of North Sea oil and gas. I am not so naïve as to suppose that a more substantial anthropological record would necessarily have led to greater political enlightenment. But it would certainly have provided a distinctive evidence base from which to challenge prejudice and uninformed policy and to contribute to a greater understanding of the subtleties and complexities and differences among cultures, as it is doing successfully now. The moments which demand intensive anthropological attention to events cannot be recreated: they are historically particular, and have to be regarded as opportunities missed. Each historical period will present its own opportunities, and we have to hope that anthropologists will be enabled to grasp them and to apply to them the irritating genius of detailed and insightful ethnographic research and cultural interpretation.

It should be said that, with the notable exception of the work done at Essex by Colin Bell, Paul Thompson and, especially, Howard Newby, sociologists also did not show much interest in rural Britain; and the Essex studies themselves had little in their method or substance to engage anthropologists in the 1970's. This was a time of acute boundary consciousness for anthropology. Sociology had the strength of numbers, but had become excessively diffuse and factionalised – or so it seemed from my perspective at Manchester; while anthropology retained a pronounced disciplinary coherence, but was contracting as a university subject. So far as British rural studies were concerned, there was little or no conversation across the boundary until the early 1980's, despite the earlier lead Ronnie Frankenberg had given; and his own attention had been engaged since then on his studies in central Africa and Italy and in developing medical anthropology. Rural Britain was seriously neglected by British social anthropologists and sociologists during a period of crucial social and cultural change.¹⁶ When British anthropologists did begin to engage more

with rural Britain during the 1980's, they discovered, or rediscovered, *Village* as their natural starting point.

Finally, there is the question of the stranger, and of the anthropologist's own 'otherness'. In order to be a leading figure in British anthropology in the mid-Twentieth century, it was not compulsory to be an outsider, but it must sometimes have seemed so. Malinowski had come from Poland; Firth from New Zealand, like Ralph Piddington, who started the Edinburgh department; Gluckman, Schapera and Fortes were all Jewish South Africans; Nadel had come from Austria; von Fuhrer Haimendorf was German; Franz Steiner was Czech. Of course there were the prominent Brits: Radcliffe-Brown, Bateson, Evans-Pritchard, Leach; but it was, as it has remained, the least anglo-saxon of university-based subjects. Why? In part, because of the very nature of the subject, and its concern with other cultures. In part, because it is such an introspective and personally-challenging mode of enquiry that it has always seemed to me that anthropologists need their personal problematics, very often related to their own identities, to drive them through its dark rigours. Ronnie Frankenberg recalls Gluckman's surprise at learning that he was not South African, and his (probably feigned) inability to understand why an Englishman, even a Jewish Englishman of Polish parentage, could possibly want to become an anthropologist (Frankenberg, 1989: 176). He seems to have answered his own question by diagnosing Ronnie as neurotic, and insisting that he should see a psychoanalyst. They did share an interest in Freud (Frankenberg, 1989: 170).

The paradigm of anthropological research was then still that of the detached outsider and observer, proficient in the indigenous language, acquiring detailed knowledge of the society's structure and its cultural richness through prolonged and intensive fieldwork. But the objective was the accumulation of 'factual' data, which could then be used to sustain the interpretation of the society's more elusive, symbolic processes and practices. This was still long before the 'interpretive turn' and the shift of emphasis towards 'culture' became apparent in British social anthropology. Outsiderhood was an instrument of research, rather than an impediment. It was a matter with which anthropologists were explicitly concerned. But it will have meant something different again to the neophyte scholar working within reach of his academic home, in (mostly) his own language, among people who were white, subject to the same government, reading the same newspapers, and liable to be held continuously to account by the people among whom he was living and who he was studying. Having grown up in London during the Second War with a sense of his otherness, or difference, in a Jewish family, bearing a German-Jewish name, and then having survived three years at Cambridge with the same assets or liabilities, it is perhaps understandable that Ronnie Frankenberg would have a particular sensitivity to and interest in strangerhood, and the uses to which it can be put in difficult circumstances.

It was to the great and enduring benefit of social anthropologists and sociologists that he put it to such excellent use; and we all owe a debt of thanks

to those small-minded colonial administrators who decided that Ronnie was far too troublesome a character to be let loose on their turf. We would have known more about St Vincent; but the anthropological study of Britain would have been even longer delayed.

Notes

- 1 Indeed, writing this article has alerted me to the extent to which *I* was subject to at least the residue of some of the key influences on Ronnie's anthropology, a fact about which I don't think I have previously been quite so aware.
- 2 See Spencer, 2000, for a discussion of the research seminar as the distinctive feature of the culture of British social anthropology.
- 3 Indeed, I remember once driving Ronnie back to Keele from a conference in Birmingham, trying desperately to keep my underpowered Volkswagen van on the motorway in a severe gale, while Ronnie became increasingly agitated with me and insisted that he had never left anthropology – although he did concede, with his inimitable giggle, that it may briefly have left him.
- 4 As the outcome of my own long agitation on this matter, not least regarding the Social Science Research Council's abysmal failure to commission in timely manner work on the probable impact of North Sea oil-related development, in 1982–83 I was commissioned by the SSRC to write a report on the then state of anthropological studies of Britain. This was almost coincident with another SSRC-commissioned report on ethnography, undertaken by Susan Drucker-Brown. The volume of funded work on Britain increased notably soon after; but I am sure this was much less a consequence of these reports than of other changes to the SSRC/ESRC funding environment and policy.
- 5 It is perhaps instructive that *Village* was not included in Bell and Newby's authoritative critical survey, *Community Studies* (1971).
- 6 Peters succeeded Gluckman in the Manchester Chair, having been recruited to Manchester by Gluckman early in his own tenure.
- 7 In his 1989 essay, Ronnie described this exchange as 'good humoured'. For the sake of the peaceful repose of Emrys Peters's spirit, one can but hope that he was right. Having had the great good fortune to have known both of them, I think he probably was.
- 8 Indeed, in 1971 when Cato Wadel and I convened an international colloquium on local-level politics, Robert Paine, Director of Memorial's Institute of Social and Economic Research, invited Ronnie to participate as a principal discussant. He could not accept because of his commitments in Lusaka. The other initially invited discussant, Peter Worsley, did come (and was inspirational) – which also accounts for my own appointment later that year to his new sociology department at Manchester.
- 9 In his careful, informed review of the Manchester School, Werbner shows that the school was anything but monolithic in its views and direction. Indeed, he quotes a personal communication from Clyde Mitchell who describes the School from the inside as 'a seething contradiction'. Werbner argues that this diversity, disciplined by a shared approach to ethnographic evidence, was the School's strength (Werbner, 1984: 158).
- 10 Indeed, he wrote that if he was to be allowed to take only one book to his desert island, that would be the one (Frankenberg, 1982).
- 11 Alone among the countries of the British Isles Ireland has such a literary tradition. In Scotland, the Northern and Hebridean islands have been fairly well covered, though not systematically; but studies of mainland Scotland, Wales and England have been patchy. For a recent survey, see Rapport, 2002.
- 12 The notable exceptions which come to mind are Judith Okely's at Oxford, and Judith Ennew's at Cambridge.

- 13 The title of J.H.M. Beattie's popular textbook, one of the few ever written for use in the U.K.
- 14 Valdo used to insist that he had always been a sociologist; but there were interesting differences of view among Manchester anthropologists about this.
- 15 Unusually, I had moved in the opposite direction. In 1971, I had come from teaching anthropology in Canada to the Manchester sociology department, which had just separated from social anthropology, explicitly to carry responsibility for the sociology department's continuing obligations and commitments to anthropology teaching. But it quite soon became an uncomfortable academic base for me, and in 1979 I moved formally into the social anthropology department at Manchester. Incidentally, it was not until then that I was permitted to join the Association of Social Anthropologists, which was still hypersensitive, even neurotic about disciplinary boundaries.
- 16 I think two significant turning points were the formation of the BSA's Rural Economy and Society Study Group; and then another and multi-disciplinary group, which I believe was the product of discussions among Peter Hamilton, Philip Lowe and myself in the early 1980's, and which attempted the systematic comparison of social science studies of post-War rural Britain and France (see Lowe and Bodiguel, 1990).

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