

Obituary

## Sir Raymond Firth (1901–2002)

With the death of Raymond Firth on 22 February, anthropology has lost one of its giants. Firth's 80-year career encompassed the development of the modern form of the subject. He left his mark on almost every sub-field in his speciality, social anthropology.

Firth was born in 1901 in Auckland, New Zealand, and was educated in economics at Auckland University College. His interest in anthropology began when, as a schoolboy browsing through an Auckland bookshop, he came upon Frederic Maning's *Old New Zealand*, a study of traditional Maori life. So began Firth's lifelong fascination with the native peoples of the South Pacific, an interest that would eventually inspire his first book, *Primitive Economics of the New Zealand Maori*, published in 1929.

In the mid-1920s, Firth moved to London to pursue a doctorate at the London School of Economics, where he came under the influence of Bronislaw Malinowski. Malinowski's meticulous studies of the Trobriand islanders of New Guinea were among the earliest fieldwork-based ethnographies. This was a time when the basic concepts and approaches of anthropology were being formulated. French sociology was under the sway of Émile Durkheim's concern with 'social solidarity', while the philosopher Lucien Lévy-Bruhl was investigating cultural effects on thought and logic. Across the Atlantic, Franz Boas and Alfred Kroeber emphasized the concept of 'culture', a collective system of beliefs and practices. Over the next several decades, Boas's students Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict published best-sellers portraying cultures boldly as contrasting psychological types.

British social anthropologists, by contrast, were not interested in broad speculations about mind or society. Nor were they concerned with patterns of culture. Instead, they produced fine-grained accounts of a society's functional integration, derived from empirical studies of small-scale societies. Their general concern was with social structure, rather than culture or mind.

In 1928, Firth returned to the Pacific for a year's fieldwork on the tiny island of Tikopia at the eastern end of the Solomon Islands. Although, geographically, Tikopia lies within Melanesia, it is a Polynesian outlier, at that time home to some 1,300 Polynesians. This trip inaugurated Firth's long relationship with Tikopia and its people, the eventual result being dozens of articles and nine books — the greatest



### A Tikopian odyssey

record of any single society by a single ethnographer. In 'simple' societies with relatively little institutional specialization, ethnography was inevitably a generalist enterprise, demonstrating how specific aspects of social life were interlocking pieces of a larger puzzle. Firth would later call the big picture 'social organization' and would stress its dynamics.

*We, The Tikopia* (1936), Firth's first book on Tikopia, is still a classic, notable for its mix of detailed observation and gentle theoretical insight. Firth made little Tikopia into a 'big place' for anthropology, demonstrating the value of paying a lifetime of attention to a small, isolated and coherent community. Firth's last book on Tikopia, a study of the island's music, was published in 1990. In between, there were volumes on religion, politics and economics, equivalent to several pages for every living Tikopian.

Malinowski had championed a kind of 'universalist functionalism' that asked how basic human needs were met in different social settings. Firth preferred a more relativistic vision of social function, stressing how human needs might be locally shaped. For example, following a long discussion of the prohibition of incest in *We, The Tikopia*, Firth concluded "that the incest situation varies according to the social structure of each community, that it has little to do with the prevention of sex relations as such, but that its real

correlation is to be found in the maintenance of institutional forms in the society as a whole, and of the specific interest of groups in particular". But although emphasizing social institutions, Firth was also sensitive to the importance of individuals, to the role of personal choice and to the flexibility of social norms.

Firth also published influential studies of Malay fishermen and middle-class kinship in London, and he co-edited a multi-volume handbook on the South Pacific for British naval intelligence during the Second World War. He also wrote several general works, notably *Human Types: An Introduction to Social Anthropology* (1938), *Elements of Social Organisation* (1951) and, in 1996, *Religion: A Humanist Interpretation*.

Apart from a two-year spell at the University of Sydney in the early 1930s, Firth's academic home remained the London School of Economics. He was appointed professor in 1944 and remained there until his retirement in 1968.

In the following years he became a peripatetic teacher, undertaking lecturing stints at several universities. In 1971–72 he was visiting professor at the University of Chicago, where 'symbolic anthropology' was being developed. Unfazed by fears that he might be bringing coals to Newcastle, Firth delivered a series of engaging lectures on human symbolism which were published in 1973 as *Symbols: Public and Private*.

It was at Chicago that I first encountered Raymond Firth in person. As a student in his 'Post-Field Seminar', I saw a master teacher at work. He was an intent listener with a keen memory for the contributions of each participant. Firth choreographed his seminars, calling upon particular students to develop a thread of discussion based on what they had said previously. Inevitably, a coherent and engaging debate would emerge. Firth's teaching skills were clearly tied to his formidable abilities as an ethnographer.

Raymond Firth will be remembered for many virtues: boundless energy, an infectious curiosity, a commitment to getting the facts right, a talent for finding big things in small places, and his sheer durability as a scholar. Temperamentally, Firth was notable for his intellectual balance and his unflinching good sense. Personally, he was a thoroughly delightful and genial gentleman, with a talent for long friendships.

His wife of 66 years, Rosemary, died last year; she, too, was an anthropologist and a frequent collaborator with her husband. A son, Hugh, survives them.

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