

**(People who have most influenced my life, by Alan Macfarlane)**

**Ernest Gellner (1925-1995)**

As an academic one is always on the look-out for models or exemplars. In particular, one is half-searching for contemporaries, probably older than oneself, who seem to have a touch of greatness, to be destined to be among the immortals. Ernest Gellner, the distinguished philosopher, sociologist and anthropologist is one of the few I have met in the humanities and social sciences who may fit into this category.

I first heard about Ernest in the early 1960's. One of my teacher's at Oxford was a certain Lady Rosalind Clay. She had shown me a series of articles in the *New York Review of Books* by Ved Mehta where he had interviewed a number of historians who were in heated argument about the rise or non-rise of the gentry. Mehta also wrote another series concerning the controversy stirred up by Ernest's first book, *Words and Things*, which was an amused but damaging attack on Oxford linguistic philosophy and in particular the later Wittgenstein. The journal *Mind* had refused to let it be reviewed, to which Bertrand Russell and others had objected. I distinctly remember Mehta's account of his meeting with Ernest (the articles were reprinted in *The Fly and the Fly Bottle*) in which he described how Ernest wrote by dictating into a tape-recorder (which Ernest vehemently denied, though I later saw him use a similar method).

I came into personal contact with Ernest in 1968 when I was doing my M.Phil. in anthropology at the L.S.E., where he was a Professor. I remember being forcefully struck by two things then. One was an article called 'Concepts and Society' which I finally tracked down and xeroxed and read with enormous excitement. It was witty, liberating, made huge sense in treating concepts in a Durkheimian way. The other was meeting Gellner. Small, limping and with a walking stick, a huge forehead, he looked the arche-typical philosopher.

I must have attended a seminar or two with him and was touched after that by the fact that when we met he would politely stop and ask how I was. This may have been part of what he disparagingly called his headmistress approach. A headmistress when talking to the teachers at the start of the term warned them, 'Be nice to the little girls, however horrid they are, for you never know who they may marry'. In fact, I think Ernest was just being nice, but felt embarrassed at being caught out as soft hearted. I felt honoured and proceeded to read more of his work.

In fact I think I was quite critical of the first book I read, called *Thought and Change*. I was going through a left-wing and ecological phase. I believed in doom and gloom and was convinced that the industrial revolution had been a prelude to real problems. Ernest's contention that we had overcome the Malthusian problem of population and scarcity through technology struck me as over-optimistic. He argued that Malthus' law had been inverted; production now grew exponentially and population in only a linear way, so that improvement and growth of affluence was built into the system. I felt he was wrong, but could not quite summon up the

arguments as to why. But the scintillating and amusing nature of the book captivated me.

One of the keys to Ernest's character was that he loved to attack any vested interest, any system which he thought was closed, authoritarian or pompous. All hints of fascism, left or right, were anathema. All self-referential, closed systems of belief both fascinated and disgusted him. So he attacked or studied over his life-time the great closed systems of his time, in particular Communism and Islam. He also attacked other examples, psycho-analysis, post-modernism, Wittgenstein's later philosophy, and various **ex cathedra** pronouncements of leading anthropologists such as Edmund Leach, Clifford Geertz and others.

Naturally this made him many enemies, but since it was obvious that he just loved arguing, also many friends and admirers. I have never really enjoyed controversy for its own sake and have found savage reviews of my work a bit distressing. But Ernest may have given me a little more backbone.

Anyway, I was impressed to meet the author who had caused such a storm by his first book. And I suspect that his memories of that experience gave Ernest a particular sympathy for me when the *Origins of English Individualism* came out. Not only did he give the book a boost by declaring in a paper that it was his book of the year (1978), but also he used to ask me sympathetically whether the more savage reviews by the likes of Rodney Hilton were worrying me.

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We must have remained in touch after I went to do my fieldwork in Nepal in 1968. He was an admirer and friend of my supervisor Fürer-Haimendorf which may have helped. Ernest was contemplating changing his main ethnographic field from Morocco to the Himalayas and nearly became a Professor at Kathmandu in the early 1970's. Ernest loved mountains and I think this what attracted him. Anyway, I remember he went trekking in the Annapurna's in 1976 and carried a copy of the proofs of my book on *Resources and Population* with him. The review he wrote, which was lengthy and favourable, though there were some serious questions and re-interpretations as well, formed the front cover of the *Times Literary Supplement* ('High and Low in the Himalayas'). It helped publicize the book and put me further in his debt.

By this time I was teaching in the Department of Social Anthropology and about that year, before we moved from Grantchester (i.e. before Sept. 1976), Ernest came to stay. Characteristically he brought a tent and car and canoe, as well as one of his children, for a trip up the fenland rivers. He came into our spacious house to watch his favourite football team (from memory, Portsmouth). But despite our entreaties to use one of the spare bedrooms, insisted in plodding out in the pouring rain late at night to set up his tent by the headlights of his car. Obstinacy was his middle name, an

obstinacy which helped him fight the deteriorating and wasting disease in his hips which made his active life so especially difficult.

It must have been a year or two later that he became a yearly visitor to Cambridge. I was in charge of the 'Theory' paper in the Part II of the Anthropology Tripos and every year would arrange for Ernest to give four lectures in the summer term on grand social theory. I think it must have started in about 1979. The first year he gave the four lectures without notes and at the end asked whether I could collect some notes taken by students as he would like to work them up into a book and did not know what he had said! I was amazed, but procured some lecture notes (among them from my future Ph.D. student Sofka Zinovieff). The same thing happened the following year, so the third year I arranged for the lectures to be tape recorded.

They were wonderful lectures. We could see an immensely powerful and erudite mind, trained in analytical philosophy, sociology and anthropology (he had been Professor in all three) talking as an equal about great social thinkers and their theories. In particular he talked about the Enlightenment figures and especially his favourite David Hume. Parts of the lectures went over my head, as they did with the students, but one could see the general question that lay behind them. This question was how this amazing modern world emerged against all the laws and predictions of the great thinkers. It was the Enlightenment question, being re-asked two centuries later with the experience of fascism (by which his own Czechoslovakia had been destroyed) and communism, and Ernest's close experience of Islam to add to the data. Little diagrams of submarines with periscopes which were later published were drawn on the board. And all the time one felt in the presence of greatness, and of someone who spoke directly about the big issues.

After the lectures we would take wine and sandwiches to King's garden and talk into the afternoon. It was very special, and made more so when I expressed an interest in sailing and Ernest suggested that we go sailing with him at Chichester, when he had a small boat. We did so two or three times, staying a night or two. He even let us use the boat on our own. I can't say I enjoyed the sailing much, but talking to Ernest made it special, though there were long gaps in the conversation as he had the tendency to sit for long periods without saying anything.

Our friendship and my admiration increased, so that when Jack Goody retired and the Wyse Chair was advertised I became one of his chief internal supporters. It was a close thing, but he was elected. In the summer of 1983, just before he arrived to take up the post, we had our last easy, relaxed, time together before the relationship changed to the more formal one of Professor and Reader. He invited Sarah and me down to the peasant hamlet he had bought high up on a north Italian hill-side at Fontanilli. We took our daughter Astrid with us (who had always got on well with Ernest, playing long-distance chess with him etc.) and first stopped off at Jack Goody's house in the south of France. There we found Jack hectically busy laying drains so that Esther mainly entertained us. We then went on to Fontanilli. There we sat and drank wine in the evenings after days walking through the hot, abandoned, terraces full of thyme and butterflies.

We did not talk much about our own work. I must have been working on yet another draft of kinship and marriage or perhaps just finishing the book called *Justice*

*and the Mare's Ale*. Only later did I realize that the book Ernest was writing (sitting in a deck chair with a small typewriter) was a draft of one of his most famous and widely read books, *Nations and Nationalism*.

So in October 1983 Ernest came to Cambridge as William Wyse Professor, where he would remain until 1991. During these eight years he struggled to master the complexities of the ancient Cambridge administrative and political system. He was used to considerable secretarial support and a centralized university at the London School of Economics. The distributed power, endless decisions, leading by example, responsibility without power, of Cambridge did not appeal to him. He enjoyed intellectual encounters and occasions, some sparkling seminars and teaching good graduates, he enjoyed the social life of King's, but never mastered the basics of how the University worked. A combination of being too logical in his thought, and a basic desire to get on with his writing in the most productive era of his life, meant that administration was kept to a minimum.

The Department was by now filled mainly with middle aged anthropologists, fairly entrenched in their ways and somewhat dogmatic in their views, not an easy place to run, and needing energy and knowledge to do so. As I had been instrumental in Ernest's election, and because I liked and admired him so much, I found myself drawn into trying to help him. I acted as Head of Department, in effect, for over two years of his eight years of office, half a year at a time in his last two years and a whole year on another occasion. Even when I was not Head of Department, I did more than my normal share in order to make things work. I only realized the burden, actual and psychological, compounded by being Chairman of the Faculty Board for two years during this period, when Marilyn Strathern took over in 1993. The previous year there had been an interregnum and I had again been Head of Department. Then Marilyn came and I suddenly felt the weight of responsibility fall away.

Thus the period with Ernest exactly coincided with the period when I returned to work on Nepal, and also the Naga project, both projects fully supported by him. But in terms of deep, continuous, concentration needed for serious writing, it was difficult. I did write the final version of *Marriage and Love in England* and gather together the essays for *Culture of Capitalism*, but otherwise there was not much fresh work. Compared to the eight years after 1993, when I wrote and published five books, it was a relatively fallow period in terms of new thought.

Yet, at another level, having Ernest around, our discussions and reading his books, was a great inspiration and this fed in at a deeper level. Ever since my undergraduate days I had asked basic questions about our extraordinary modern world and how it had emerged, the origins and effects of the industrial revolution, the nature and origins of modernity and so on. This lies behind all my works. But I seldom encountered people who asked such simple, wide, questions. Even Keith Thomas was confined to a few centuries in one country, and Peter Laslett likewise. Ernest was like Jack Goody in his breadth. But while he lacked Jack's ethnographic nose, political skills, or interest in material life, his philosophical background was stronger. He was the first person I had met who asked the really great world-important questions in the tradition of the Scottish Enlightenment and Max Weber. He also had such a lofty and incisive mind that he made wonderful syntheses of complex data. He was one of the

very few thinkers (in the arts, humanities and social sciences) whom one could describe as brilliant, and perhaps great.

At the time he was probing these questions in books like *Sword, Plough and Book*, and a number of papers. We disagreed somewhat about where the answers lay (see my various writings on him), but there was no doubt in my mind that he was asking the right questions. My two books, *Riddle of the Modern World* and *Making of the Modern World*, published after his death (the former dedicated to him and with a chapter on him) are really extended conversations with Ernest, an attempt to persuade him to accept my views. His experience had reminded him of what most of us have forgotten – the extraordinary revolution that has occurred, which is, as I write this in a Chinese village, causing the largest revolution in the history of human consumption and communication that has ever occurred.

So although I do not think Ernest had either the long-term patience or methodological tools to solve the greatest questions, at least he tried. He was not a Montesquieu, Smith or Tocqueville. But his brilliant essays (his best form) give glimpses of where a solution might be found. And he validated the quest by re-focusing on what appeared to be long-dead questions. Unlike most of those who studied the classic thinkers, he treated them as still valid and worthwhile, not just historic fossils. He was a true inspiration and good friend.

[for my more formally stated views on his ideas, see under Gellner etc. on my web site]