

TODAY'S LIVES: Saturday 17th October, 1500 GMT, Milton Keynes, UK

Ruth Finnegan: being, with joy, fully a human being

I was born on the last day of 1933 in Derry, Northern Ireland, the eldest child of Dr Thomas Finnegan, Professor of Classics and President of Magee College Londonderry (www.ulster.ac.uk), later, under his leadership, Magee University College, and of Agnes Finnegan née Campbell, teacher and writer. My family (Protestant) were on both sides of notably liberal, peace-loving and democratic convictions.

I mostly grew up in Derry, a wonderful but then deeply troubled city (which I try to describe in 'The air of Derry') but I also vividly recall the magic of County Donegal where with my parents I spent most of the war years. 13 months of this was in a small cottage by a 'gentle' (faerie) wood leading down to the enchanted sea – a true *tir nan og* – an experience movingly described in my mother's entrancing memoir *Reaching for the Fruit* as well as in the second (poetic but accurate) chapter of my own semi-autobiographical novel, *Black Inked Pearl*. This had a seminal and lasting influence on my understanding and my life.

In order to avoid an upbringing tainted by Ulster religious divisions, on their return to Derry in 1945 my parents wisely sent me to a Quaker school in York (The Mount) where the experience of memorising and repeating daily 'texts' from the Bible and other literature, as well as my active involvements in the performance arts of drama and music, shaped my future creative work. Evident in one way or another in all my writing, my deeply felt but not always thoroughly accurate memory of these repeated texts in some way come through in all my work, most directly in [Why do we quote?](#) and, again, in my [Black Inked Pearl](#) and the screenplay arising from it.

This school experience was followed by four joyous years (1952–56) at Somerville College, Oxford. I spent them in the delightful study of classics, a degree that combined literature, history and philosophy. I ended up, to my amazement (me, a little Irish girl!) with one of the best firsts of the year ever in classics (literate humaniores, then one of the largest and most hated ghky regarded schools of the university). Better, with some enduring friendships and convictions. I have to admit that it was also a delight to be at a university where the proportion of women to men was one in seven, so I had a great time. How can jaundiced feminists ever call this a bleak Oxford time for women... ! And with women running most of the societies too, and getting many of the best degrees results .

Then I spent two years teaching, which I liked, and repaying my student debt (yes, student loans existed then too, just they didn't come from the Government). This was at the then leading public school of Malvern Girls College, now Malvern St James.

It was a time for much thought and exploration as well as walks on the lovely Malvern hills. But then, having earlier resisted as self-indulgent and somehow elitist the idea of longer at Oxford or 'research' (whatever that was. ...) I found I wanted to learn more about the world and thus to return to the intellectual life. This time, much though I will always love the amazing riches of Greek and Roman cultures, I felt impelled to follow my instincts, honed partly by the anti-colonialist and broadly left-wing stance that I shared both with my parents and with fellow students at Oxford, and to widen my learning to other cultures – those that at the time received so much less attention or esteem in the world of scholarship (perhaps the start of my anthropology – and ethics-fueled interest in the disregarded and 'hidden').

The obvious thing, for me, was to focus on Africa.

At the time that meant anthropology. So, finding that my degree result made me unexpectedly welcome (and funded) back at Oxford I completed first the postgraduate Diploma in Anthropology and then a second year writing a B.Litt, dissertation, then seen as completing the initial anthropology foundation for independent fieldwork. With the world-famous E. E. Evans-Pritchard and the eccentric and inspiring Godfrey Lienhardt as my mentors, and other wonderful staff to help me, I had a wonderful – if both intellectually and personally challenging – time.

In many ways it was a world-changing, indeed world-upsetting, period of my life. For an Ulster girl to meet her tutors in pubs! that was where the understated teaching went on: socialisation into the world-view of anthropology rather than, as I had expected, a time of information-transfer or intellectual critique. And, at first shockingly, brought up as I had been as a Protestant albeit, as I'd thought an open-minded one, to be taught by Catholics! Catholic converts!! Brilliant ones too.

This was my first real introduction to a differing world-view from my own long-presupposed one: a better preparation for the revolution of fieldwork than any 'methods course' could have been (not that such things existed at the time, in Oxford anyway). Then it somehow turned out that I would, of course (!), be going

off 'to the field' as the basis for a doctoral thesis, the accepted entry to the 'profession' as a 'proper' anthropologist. This was something I had never planned; it was just taken for granted.

So, almost without quite intending it but with a lot of careful preparation and fund seeking (a protracted and troubled story that was – I'll tell it another time) there I was! Yes, there I was in the midst of an intensely inspiring intensely challenging intensely unforgettable year spent mostly in a small hilltop village in the remoter parts of northern Sierra Leone. I was embarked in a study of the [Limba speaking people](#) there then – how misleadingly – reputed to have. 'Fourth rate language', whatever that is supposed to mean, and to be the 'stupidness' of the thirteen 'tribes' then recognised in Sierra Leone,

This lasted for just over a year (1960–61) followed by a brief re-visit together with my husband, in 1963-4. Consonant with the literary interests fostered throughout my childhood, then more intensively during my four-year classics degree, I found I was focusing on story-telling – well eventually: I was originally, by my Colonial Office (part-funders), meant to be investigating something about why some Limba people were, apparently so inexplicably (horror!), wishing to move to 'the towns'. I did report on this, and they thought it good enough to publish (my first book). So at least I paid my debts. But it was not my main interest.

It was the stories that entranced me – their literature. Actually, it was not so much the stories but, in the end, their telling, that fascinated and taught me.



Ruth with Karanke Dema, gifted Limba smith, musician and story-teller, in the village of Kakarima 1964.

From Limba narrators I learned the lesson that never left me and that has permeated my later writing: that, as explained more fully at the start of my *Where is Language?*, what was involved was, and is, something more than verbal and writable 'text' (my paradigm up to then). It was performance, multisensory, co-constructed, and, in a way (but not every way) ephemeral, situational; active, multimodal. expression and communication, a sharing. This first piece of fieldwork which, as for other anthropologists, gave me insights

which have informed and inspired just about all my later writing, creative and other.¹

Based on this fieldwork I successfully completed my D.Phil dissertation, supported by Nuffield College and supervised by the celebrated anthropologist [E. E. Evans-Pritchard](#). I was poised, it seemed, for a career in academe.

The next thing was marriage in September 1963 to David John Murray (grandson of Sir James Murray, the first editor of the Oxford English Dictionary), whom, with a background and convictions similar to mine, I met as a fellow student at Nuffield College in 1962. It was a happy and enduring decision, and in 2013 we celebrated our 50th anniversary.

I was with him too at the University College of the Rhodesias and Nyasaland in the then Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) where he had already been teaching, and enjoyed my first university post – hard work, especially in those initial years, but for both of us a great experience.

Neither of us could bear the then hardening apartheid-like regime however so, lucky once again to get jobs together, we moved to the University of Ibadan in Nigeria distinguished in many ways, not least for its amazing Africa collection on the top floor of the beautifully designed airy library, where I spent so many happy and productive hours. I loved the teaching too and the mature and heterogeneous students, good preparation for my next job. We spent just under five incredibly interesting years there (1965–9).

It was during this period that our three daughters Rachel, Kathleen and Brigid were born. Looking back I am not sure how with only, in all, just six weeks maternity leave, one (normal) sabbatical term, and, of course, generous summer vacations back in England, I managed, and so happily, three pregnancies and births (followed by delightful, long, breast-feeding), a full lecturing programme, training in the then-dominant computer program FORTRAN, and the completion of Oral Literature in Africa, scarcely a short book, and a spate of articles – but there they are to prove it.

¹ My field notes are deposited (with some qualms, as I imagine for others too, at this self-exposure) in the archives of the [School of Oriental and African Studies](#), University of London); digitised versions of audio taped Limba story-telling and (minimally) music are available [here](#).

In 1969 David and I were excited to read of the plans for the pioneering and inspirational [Open University](#), its democratising and open vision so close to ours. We both applied for jobs there. He, first, was recruited as Professor of Government, I a little later – a sop, I think, to get him. We remained enthusiastically attached there for the rest of our careers, and, I believe, truly contributed (specially him). We were and are proud to have been founding members of the academic staff. We are equally proud now both to be Emeritus Professors.

We learned so much! It was wonderful working out distance-learning courses (in my case mostly interdisciplinary – there was no ‘anthropology’ as such so I was employed in ‘Sociology’: not that I cared about terminology, anthropology after all is everywhere is it not?). We were clear from the outset that these were to be courses which would be as demanding and thought-provoking as campus-based courses anywhere in the world (staff at conventional universities scorned us at that time – no longer – as attempting the impossible: and using radio and television too!), But in addition they were also to be do-able, and by students at a number of levels too: not a combination all members of staff were equally happy to attempt. Though we all, I think, missed the day-to-day interchange with students characteristic of more conventional universities, involvement in distance-teaching was a truly wonderful and mind-changing challenge, both practically and intellectually (more on this in my articles on the Open University). I loved it. This was interrupted only by three years’ secondment, with our daughters, to the lovely [University of the South Pacific](#).

This was an occasion for developing distance-learning modules suitable for study in the far-flung islands of the Pacific then served by USP, and for further fieldwork, this time on the musical worlds of the capital city, Suva. The results of this research lay in abeyance for many years but finally, supplemented by work in the BBC Written Archives in Reading and a further brief visit to Fiji, it eventuated in early 2016 as *Travels and Travails of Music* – with further transformations under slightly different titles – an account that is in some ways just straightforward ethnography (and history) but, perhaps because of its long gestation, particularly pleases me. It also, after our return to England in 1978, was a kind of parallel and foundation (confidence booster too) for my protracted fieldwork on local amateur musicians practising in the town we lived in.

Now, many years later, in 2020, I find myself to my surprise, quite a well-known scholar: I am an Emeritus Professor of the Open University, Fellow of the British Academy, Fellow of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and

Ireland, International Fellow of the American Folklore Society (I feel so honoured by this!), holder of the Rivers Medal, Foreign Associate of the Finnish Literature Bureau, and Honorary Fellow of Somerville College Oxford.

I can look back on a life, still continuing, of being not only a wife in a long-lasting marriage, a mother, and a grandmother (how fortunate is that!), but also of being an anthropologist and creative writer with interdisciplinary interests, especially in classical studies, literature, sociolinguistics, modes of thought, cultural history and, by now, spiritual and so-called extra-sensory experience – in short of being, with joy, fully a human being.