

**Professor Dame Marilyn Strathern**

**Doctor of Science**

**Durham Cathedral, 27<sup>th</sup> June 2007**

When, in 1898, the University of Durham gave an honorary degree to the great anthropologist Sir James Frazer – the author of *The Golden Bough*, which is as much a seminal text of the modern world as Marx's *Capital* or Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* – when Durham honoured Sir James Frazer anthropologists were agreed about what they were doing: there were advanced civilizations, and there were primitive cultures. But Gauguin was already painting Tahiti, Stravinsky would soon compose *The Rite of Spring*, and D. H. Lawrence travel in search of pre-mechanical cultures. It was becoming clear that 'civilization' might not be all its apologists claimed – that what Sir James Frazer reported demonstrated a human richness and depth lost in the march of progress. What anthropologists found – in fieldwork, description, analysis, and theory – unthreaded the dichotomy 'advanced / primitive'. Over the last thirty years Dame Marilyn Strathern has been among the foremost of those who have continued creatively to destabilize the fundamental concepts of her discipline, in part by turning the gaze of her research subjects on the conceptions of their researchers. Some of the classic conceptual tools of anthropological description and analysis – nature and culture, the individual and society, kinship, even male and female – have been brought into question, as assumptions taken for granted and so invisible have been made explicit.

A young Dr Strathern began questioning the questions that anthropologists ask by work in Mount Hagen in Papua New Guinea. How should one think of 'society' – can one think of it at all? – when communities speaking the same language two valleys apart are not aware of each other? How should one think of the individual in contexts where – more obviously than here – each person is so much composed of their social relationships? Even with those apparent givens, male and female, biological form may be less important than cultural function. In *The Gender of the Gift*, which, since its publication less than twenty years ago has become a classic, Dame Marilyn argues for a more nuanced interpretation of feminist constructions of Melanesian social and cultural life. Positions of male-female dominance and subordination can be more passing states of relationship than observers rooted in Western assumptions about gender and power readily see; and genitals signify not so much by what people have as by what they do with that: interchangeability between male and female sexual parts can take forms that anyone brought up on Western symbolism in these intriguing matters may find less than obvious. But identifying how the preconceptions of researchers distorted the understanding of radically different situations is (Dame Marilyn has said) easy compared with the imaginative and intellectual effort required to find more adequate concepts, and deploy them in more appropriate ways. The ethnographer cannot occupy a place outside her observations; so, like other areas of the Humanities and Social Sciences, Anthropology has faced

problems of making its constructions of knowledge explicit, providing not so much representations of other cultures as points of connection with them. Here too Marilyn Strathern has been a leading figure, experimenting with modes of writing in which multiple perspectives keep in the forefront of the reader's mind that as an ethnographer is situated, so (in part) she sees.

Marilyn Strathern began fieldwork in Papua New Guinea in 1964. After a period as a curator in the Cambridge Museum of Ethnology, and fellowships at the Australian National University, in Cambridge, and at Berkeley, in 1985 she was catapulted into her first academic teaching post in Britain as Professor and Head of the Department of Social Anthropology at Manchester University. Two years later she became a Fellow of the British Academy, and in 1993 William Wyse Professor at Cambridge, by which time she was a central figure in British Anthropology. In 1998 she became Mistress of what had been her first home at Cambridge, Girton College.

For Dame Marilyn Anthropology means deploying certain modes of thought, not necessarily crossing cultural boundaries. Her work in Papua New Guinea has been complemented by studies of British society. In a study of the Essex village of Elmdon she used her Melanesian experience of learning to listen for significance in unlikely places. Claims about who was or was not a 'real villager' – which turned out to mean who could trace their descent to a small number of labouring families – were opened out for what they revealed about the English class system. In *After Nature* she examined English kinship in the late twentieth century, repositioning that traditional anthropological topic in an unusually wide context, and writing partly in response to Margaret Thatcher's famous or infamous pronouncement that there is no such thing as society, only individuals and families. With scarcely suppressed polemical intention Dame Marilyn examined the ethos of what saw itself as 'the Enterprise Culture', but what others saw less flatteringly as the consumer culture, and its brand (indicative term!) its brand of individualism.

Anthropology is a discipline concerned with the accurate description of social phenomena. It does not of itself offer guidance about how to act. But it can help us to think in a more fully informed way about issues of public policy that have social-science dimensions. Dame Marilyn has applied anthropological analysis to practical issues in bioethics, academic management, and law. In the wake of legislation about human fertilization and embryology in the 1990s, as a member of the Nuffield Council on Bioethics, Dame Marilyn examined issues raised by new technologies of reproduction – a partial reinvention of kinship, which was already assuming new forms under the impact of changing patterns of marriage, divorce, co-habitation, and same-sex partnerships. Dame Marilyn's experience of management in academic departments and at Girton led to work on the academic audit of research and teaching, in which she has been pungently critical of a characteristic contemporary error – valuing information codified in templates above knowledge embodied in forms of life. With legislation about intellectual and cultural property she has helped to protect the interests of cultures in which copyright law was new and its concepts alien. She has also advised on the clash of world views by which what indigenous people see as the remains of ancestors scientific institutions see as samples of DNA. In each of these areas – bioethics, academic

management, and law – she brings perspectives from anthropology to bear on issues of public policy.

For all this work, in 2001 she was made a Dame Commander of the British Empire. In 2003 the New-York-based Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research made her the first recipient in recent times of its Viking Fund Medal for outstanding intellectual leadership. And in 2004 the Royal Anthropological Institute awarded her the Huxley Memorial Medal for lifetime achievement.

It is, I understand, as much a pleasure to Dame Marilyn as it is to Durham that her relationship with the Department of Anthropology here has recently been consolidated by a major award from the Economic and Social Research Council for a project to study international science collaborations and their ethical governance.

‘There is always more’ (Dame Marilyn has remarked), ‘there is always more beyond the field of vision than one sees’; or within the field of vision than one understands; and one’s understanding can always be re-constructed by a change of viewpoint. But (and this too is Dame Marilyn) to bring to consciousness the grounding of one’s own sense of the world can make the ground disappear. Being an anthropologist is intellectually vertiginous. Dame Marilyn Strathern is widely admired for exploring the vertiginous discourses of contemporary Anthropology in a continuous effort to be more acutely responsive to the human realities that are her subject. She is also admired for her feet-on-the-ground deployment of this knowledge in the world of real policy- and decision-making.

Mr Chancellor, I present Professor Dame Marilyn Strathern to receive the degree of Doctor of Science, *honoris causa*.