

Truth's Fool: Derek Freeman and the War over Cultural Anthropology

By Peter Hempenstall

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Reviewed by Dolores Janiewski

Historian Peter Hempenstall has undertaken a challenging task in tracing the intellectual journey of the Wellington born, Victoria University College graduate and Australian National University (ANU) anthropologist, Derek Freeman. Known primarily for his controversial critique of Margaret Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa*, the topic of his two most widely-read monographs, *Margaret Mead and Samoa: The Making and Unmaking of an Anthropological Myth* (1983) and *The Fateful Hoaxing of Margaret Mead: A Historical Analysis of Her Historical Research* (1999), Freeman provoked a major battle in the cultural wars of the 1980s and 1990s. Attacking Mead, a famous anthropologist and public intellectual, Freeman attracted allegations of mental illness and personality disorders, and a major backlash from outraged members of his profession. Using Mead, the most famous anthropologist of the twentieth century and a celebrated public intellectual, as his foil to wage a war on cultural anthropology, Freeman became so absorbed in responding to his critics that he never managed to develop a fully fleshed out discussion of his alternative model for anthropology. Ironically, his efforts to seek the "truth" prevented him from achieving his primary intellectual goal in Hempenstall's sympathetic view of an earnest truth-seeker.

Seeking to present a more nuanced portrait of Freeman, Hempenstall waits until the last third of his book to discuss the intellectual convulsions and personal consequences that resulted from Freeman's assault on Mead five years after her death when she could no longer defend herself. A strong-minded mother and an ineffectual father seems to have set up a psychological need to resist "domination" for the rest of his life, according to Hempenstall (18). New Zealand readers can follow his early university days at Victoria studying with Ernest Beaglehole, his involvement with the student left, and his first visit to Samoa, where he became a teacher and noted acute problems with colonial administration. In this phase Freeman showed his linguistic abilities in learning Samoan and sympathetic interest in Samoan culture, perhaps planting the initial seed for his criticism of Mead's interpretation forty years later. Only the advent of World War II kept him from immediately following the expat route to Britain to undertake postgraduate study in anthropology, finally arriving after naval service in 1947 to study with the Auckland-born Raymond Firth at the London School for Economics, taking with him at least two thousand pages of documentation from his Samoan experiences.

Freeman's appreciation of Samoan understandings of their society caused his first conflict with Firth and other anthropologists in London and Oxford who assumed that they developed an interpretation of social structure through observation. He believed that Samoans had a quite clear grasp of the matrix of relationships creating their lineage-based culture. Whether it was a case of self-confidence, brilliance, or nonsense depended upon the vantage point of the viewer. Freeman had already started to challenge the theoretical orientations of his profession's leaders based on his own sense of his superior knowledge of Samoa.

Despite the Samoan interest, Freeman's first major field work took him to study the Iban in Borneo, accompanied by a new bride who shared the pleasures and the problems of life in an Iban community. As Hempenstall observed, she would demonstrate an unflinching patience with her husband that would endure all of his psychological tumult for the next fifty years. Then

came a short stint at Otago University and a welcome invitation to join the faculty at ANU where he remained for the rest of his career. Seemingly, Freeman had charted for himself exactly the kind of career for which he had hoped.

As Hempenstall makes clear with exemplary care to understand Freeman's motives and goals, the interactions with his colleagues at ANU were anything but harmonious. Here Hempenstall's reliance on the memories of Monica Freeman, family papers, and his close relationship with Don Tuzin, Freeman's devoted former student, means that he tends to take Freeman's part in the many conflicts and upheavals that disrupted life in the department. It is a portrait of a particular kind of academic hell, where the main question is whether Freeman was the devil or rather the victim of misunderstanding and animus from his colleagues who could not appreciate his brilliance and his unquenchable desire for truth. From the vantage point of this reader, I feel sympathy for the other anthropologists who had to deal with savage and unremitting criticism, a constant flow of letters and criticisms that came from someone always convinced that he was correct and the others unable to recognise the truth.

Although recognising that Freeman had several major psychological breakdowns, was eventually diagnosed as bipolar, and experienced psychotic episodes, Hempenstall still wants to present him as a brilliant, misunderstood and zealous truth-seeker rather than "mad" or self-deluding. The weight of the evidence suggests, however, that Freeman was responsible for extreme behaviour that he himself sought to restrain but often failed. His behaviour was often obsessive and self-destructive in that he ended up destroying his opportunities to become an influential anthropologist by alienating so many people. He failed to apply what he knew about social structure to his own immediate surroundings.

Freeman's attack on Mead for a book she had written in her mid-twenties with little theoretical sophistication, but striking a popular chord because of its idyllic portrait of an adolescent life with sexual freedom in an island paradise, was a major example of his misjudgement. A book more likely valued by other anthropologists for its ability to create popular acceptance rather than its methodological rigour somehow becomes the foundation of the field of cultural anthropology in Freeman's mistaken view. In the name of accusing Mead of denying biology, he mounted a cultural critique of her cultural analysis, arguing that she ignored the role of virginity in Samoan culture, and sexual violence, in her idealised image of adolescent sexuality.

Freeman also failed to note that raising the ire of members of his profession by an attack on a dead icon would not advance his goal of convincing colleagues to pay greater attention to the role of biology instead of cultural determinism. By not presenting his own case in anything but a cursory final chapter which got lost in the uproar, Freeman instead became a part of the cultural wars being sparked by sociobiologists and opponents of cultural relativism. Samoans also raised questions about his evidence on sexual violence. As a result, he spent his last two decades responding to critics rather than developing the biocultural approach to anthropology he aspired to create.

Freeman's battle against domination produced a life in which he demonstrated a desire to dominate others even as he expressed regret for the consequences of his actions. It was an exercise in male dominance that may also have motivated his assault on Mead as a matriarch in the field which he hoped to lead, but in which he remained in the shadows. For me the mystery is why he retained the love and care of his wife, although perhaps he did not bring the obsessions and the quest for dominance home after quarrelling with his colleagues and

badgering his students. The book makes disturbing reading for those who have experienced such conflicts and leads to a conclusion that Freeman was his own victim, driven by impulses which he could not control that prevented him from achieving his goals. This is in contrast to Mead, who enjoyed success and esteem despite the flaws in *Coming of Age in Samoa*. In Freeman's troubled psyche, that was perhaps her most unforgiveable fault.

Hempenstall has written an unforgettable portrait of a disturbed personality who may not have been mad but was certainly maddening. It made me sympathise with the colleagues and the students because brilliance always needs the saving grace of kindness and empathy, which Freeman lacked. The careful work that it took to produce this biography shows that Freeman got the biographer who could discuss his life with care and consideration, but also tell it truthfully.