

Grande-Bretagne: Anthropology at Home

Date : May 18, 2007

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Ever wondered how Englishness is portrayed in Paris? Visit The Tea Caddy on 14 rue Saint Julien-Le-Pauvre for Un buffet anglais where tiny scones and dainty cucumber sandwiches are served in a dark wood panelled room, surrounded by china and old maps. The occasion was in honour of the publication of a special issue on Grande-Bretagne: Anthropology at Home. This is the most recent special issue of *Ethnologie Française* (April 2007) to be part of a series of issues devoted to different countries written by scholars in those places, in short anthropologists doing anthropology at home. In this case the editors were Sophie Chevalier (Universite de Franche-Comte/Laios-MSH), Sharon MacDonald and Jeanette Edwards (University of Manchester). Curiously there was no tea, but there was plenty of French wine which was a fitting celebration for a beautifully presented journal.

Coming out of the tradition of European Ethnology, a journal such as *Ethnologie Française* will always have a closer relationship to material culture studies than a purely social anthropology journal such as *L'Homme*. Indeed, for this reason it has been easier for French scholars to view their research on France as a natural part of their work, while harder to get British anthropologists to frame their work as on Britain, as opposed to an aspect of Britain such as class or ethnicity. The publication of the issue was marked by a workshop at Le Centre de recherches sur les îles britanniques et l'Europe de l'Université de Paris titled "Qu'est-ce-que la Britishness?" Sophie Chevalier opened with a brief historical comparison of the sociology and anthropology of Britain and France. Sharon MacDonald focused on the creation of the issue followed by papers and discussion from some of the contributors. The papers of most interest to material culture included Elizabeth Hart's study of how former pottery workers explain the decline of the UK pottery industry.

Globalisation and abstract market forces have little place in the narratives of workers for whom the decline rests with the decreasing quality of the hand painted images, the consistency of the slip and the 'abuse' of the clay by modern managers. And Catherine Degnen's study of 'Placing memory' in a small Northern town focused on the way people and their relationships are embedded in places of which the material traces are long gone. Both papers presented a contemporary take upon the loss of community, a theme that has long concerned the study of Britain and work by scholars such as Frankenberg, Young and Wilmott. Not to mention the residents and politicians of Britain. By contrast my own paper drew upon a study of one hundred households on a London street that has little in common with village-orientated studies as few residents will ever get to know each other and there is a larger and more transient population. My paper on the material condition of memory in modern urban households examined how interior décor, collections of clothing, books, music and photographs, differentially structure remembering and forgetting, from the intentional creation of memory to the incidence of utilitarian archives. Although genres of material culture may be studied as if they have certain capacities for memory, individuals and households develop their own habits of memory, selecting between the genres in which they invest memory in the long term and utilising them differently. Each household forms its own topography of memory. Also included in the issue is a paper on Cremation and the disposal of ashes by Jenny Hockey and David Prendergast, and a historical examination of the making of anatomical knowledge in Scotland through the materiality of dead bodies by Elizabeth Hallam. In one of the few papers which considered the explicit performance of Britishness, Emma Crewe examined the rites and symbols of the House of Lords.

Finally, Marilyn Strathern reminded the workshop of the importance of critical distance when doing anthropology at home. It is sometimes surprising to see Britain through others eyes. She recalled how visitors from PNG simply did not share our obsession with class and identity, for instance they saw the houses of Britain as all the same, rejecting the way British read differences of size and ornamentation as indexes of class and focusing on the blue print structure. Some of the counterpoints for comparison are closer to home however. Taken as a whole the workshop and the journal issue suggest just how much there is to gain from a rapprochement between British material culture studies in general, and the traditions of European Ethnology both in France and elsewhere in Europe, and I am very grateful to the editors for initiating this relationship.

For details of the journal issue see:

"Grande-Bretagne : anthropology at home", *Ethnologie Française*, n°2, tome XXXVII (2007)

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