

Colin Turnbull's MC legacies

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Book review of: Grinker, Roy Richard, *In the Arms of Africa: The Life of Colin M. Turnbull*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001 [2000]. xii + 368 pp.

The famous anthropologist Colin Turnbull began to establish himself in the US through his first post as the African curator for the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Even though he trained in Britain and his work has of course had significant impact in Europe and Africa, Roy Richard Grinker's biography of Turnbull convincingly shows us how he has been much more influential to cultural anthropology and material culture studies in America rather than anywhere else.

This cross-Atlantic connection in Turnbull's work is interesting in itself however. It reflects of course the internationalization as well as professionalization of the discipline from its 'imperial/colonial' heartland. A further reconciliation comes through from his Oxford training and doctoral field site in Africa both of which were archetypical of post Second World War UK anthropology (Goody 1995). Like Mary Douglas though, it is important to note that Turnbull's research was in a Belgian territory and thus outside the direct influence of the British Colonial Office. Additionally Turnbull's

Scots/Irish identity does come in to play at times in Grinker's text, even though we are shown how his real personal development after his initial immersive fieldwork is completely tangled up with his New York cosmopolitan lifestyle, his Virginian retirement home life and a renewed field persona involving his partner.

Grinker reminds us many times that Turnbull's life and ideas were more often than not ahead of their time. What is significant for those of us interested in contemporary material culture studies is the way in which Grinker makes it obvious that Turnbull should be seen as a highly significant predecessor of this area. His museum curating in New York; his involvement in the production of the theatrical production of *Les Iks*; and the relationship that he helped establish between art/drama and anthropology are all good examples. Grinker incisively points out the possible connection to Turnbull's Oxford training under Evans-Pritchard here, whereby anthropology began to be formulated as a humanities subject which had much more affinity with the arts than the sciences (p.235).

Grinker adopts a popular non-academic style with a number of literary devices to keep the attention of the average undergraduate. The text is easy to read, with a bounty of gossip, suspense and generalisations about the discipline. At times the story is remarkably captivating in relation to the many debates that Turnbull was shrouded in. But overall the book comes up short in terms of the presentation of wider conceptual and theoretical substance. Grinker nevertheless makes many observations which are considerably astute, if overtly dilute and lacking in elaborative discursive context. Early on he suggests that part of Turnbull's fame resulted from writing about experiences and feelings that were more universal than was the case for most of his more traditional 'scientifically' minded colleagues. Yet it is not until the end of the book that he is even vaguely critical of the fact that Turnbull left little by way of significant contribution to the theoretical development of social anthropology or museology.

This seems to leave him open to talk about the work of other anthropologists and anthropological theory in only the vaguest terms: "Many anthropologists use a concept of universal rights in their advocacy for immigrants, refugees, and others; many others still cast a suspicious glance on globalizing concepts like human rights or "development"" (p. 186). Names, however, are not given, the discussion is not pushed further and we are quickly moved on to gloss over another topic that is altogether different.

Additionally, the prose is often sensationalistic and superficial, with all sorts of unsubstantiated pseudo-psychological assumptions about what was going on in the heads of his protagonists. The following passage from earlier on the same page is indicative of some of the more banal interpretations, in this case about the distinct contrast of Turnbull's emotive and romantic depiction of the Pygmies which was diametrically opposed to his alienated and ultimately dystopic portrayal of the Ik:

"Unlike the Pygmies, the Ik failed to empower Colin. Because he could do little for them the Ik threatened his role as protector or savior. Because they did not seem to respect him or care for him, the Ik never gave him the sense of self-worth he derived from Joe and other underdogs. And because the Ik never gave him someone like Kenge [his Pygmy key informant] who he could love and idolize, he grew angry and lonely. The Ik were unlikable to Colin to the end, sadly unyielding to

any Pygmalion-like efforts" (p. 186).

Unfortunately the adoption of a populist presentation style means that Grinker does not provide a comprehensive bibliography or adequate citations of the archive material he uses. Indeed, source materials are whimsically and inconsistently found in chapter notes which are not numbered throughout the text and thus require some guess work to follow. For example, Chapter 10 starts with an examination of some controversy surrounding one of Turnbull's books:

"Graham Greene praised Michael Korda [Turnbull's editor] and Colin for their courage; Margaret Mead called it "beautiful"; and reviews in *Life* and the *New York Times* saw the work as a powerful commentary on the human capacity for evil. Others called it "unethical" or "dangerous", and in the *New York Times Book Review* a reviewer called Colin "deranged" [...]" (p. 155).

Grinker presents no less than six or seven different potential sources here without citing any of them properly. Where for instance did Greene praise these people, in church? One does not need to be a trained historian - let alone a famous architect or novelist - to acknowledge that god is indeed in the detail (Greene 1951), if not for the sake of offering supportive evidence then at least as a courtesy to those readers who might be interested in chasing up any such material. Surely it is the job of a good biographer, popular or otherwise, to facilitate such a task.

It might be worth noting that there are certain similarities between Turnbull and the popular British anthropologist Nigel Barley. Both were museum curators for some time and for most of their careers free from some of the responsibilities of many academic positions. Both have also been incredibly successful authors of accessible best-seller 'travel literature' type books. Along with this fame, they consequently shared the experience of occasionally being ignored or subjected to ridicule by more 'conservative' professional anthropologists. Indeed, Turnbull had spoken out on politically sensitive issues and advocated views that many find unorthodox. Like Albert Camus (1960) had done, he protested vehemently against capital punishment during a time when he was conducting research on death row inmates (Chap 15).

Turnbull's life in terms of the arts, theatre and his Scottish origins also had its parallels with Victor Turner who made an illustrious introduction to the University of Chicago's anthropology department in the late 60s. Grinker, however, makes few such comparisons or attempts to contextualize Turnbull's life as a popular academic, the exceptions being in relation to an analogy he makes to an eccentric neuroscientist as well as to a few passing comments about one of Turnbull's colleagues, Margaret Mead, who did not seem to have much time for him.

Finally, there is a whole materiality (Hockey 1990) and landscaping (Laviolette 2003) of death at the end of Chapter 16 that is conceptually by-passed. Here the relationship between the funeral of Turnbull's partner Joe Towles and the ideas of symbolic tangibility as well as the manifestation of various identities (i.e. African / Celtic / academic / homosexual / married) could have been described in more length. Grinker recounts this event scrupulously in the ethnographic vein of thick description. Again, however, he does not seem to think that it is worth his while to contextualize the scene into a wider anthropological discourse about burial and mortuary ceremonies which he admits was itself of interest to the mourning protagonist.

Perhaps the most overt examination of the relationship between material culture and a disciplinary reflexivity concerning the ability to carry out research comes through when Grinker addresses the financial elements of Turnbull's research and publication grants, field budgets and the salaries of

his various positions. Such implicit Marxist analyses about the economic dynamics inherent in the production of knowledge reveal the importance that biographies have in the shaping of the discipline's responsibilities and self-awareness. For such reasons this is a noteworthy book, if nevertheless, a largely flawed one.

References

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