After nature is a timely account of fundamental constructs in English kinship at a moment when developments in reproductive technology are raising questions about the natural basis of kin relations. Kinship in this anthropological study is viewed in the context of contemporary cultural change, and the book is also a unique commentary on late twentieth-century English culture.

This essay on the English middle classes challenges the traditional separation of western kinship studies from study of the wider society. If contemporary society appears diverse, changing and fragmented, these same features also apply to people’s ideas about kinship. Ideas of relatedness, nature and the biological constitution of persons are viewed in their cultural context, and the work offers new insight into late twentieth-century values of individualism and consumerism.

Central as kinship has been to the development of British social anthropology, this is the first attempt by an anthropologist to offer a cultural account of English kinship. Marilyn Strathern looks back at mid-century writings, both within anthropology and outside, and demonstrates continuities between middle-class folk models of kinship and anthropological kinship theory. She also shows how conceptualisations of change have enabled that past world to produce the present one. The values placed upon individual choice, as well as the vanishing of ‘society’ as a self-evident point of reference, are part of an evolving cultural explicitness about kinship and the naturalness of connections between persons. Thus the new reproductive technologies are seen to both indicate ways in which the natural basis of kin relations is being challenged and endorse the centrality of biology to late-twentieth-century views of procreation.
After nature
THE LEWIS HENRY MORGAN LECTURES 1989

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The University of Rochester
Rochester, New York

Lewis Henry Morgan Lecture Series

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Watercolour, 1817 or 1818

The watercolour (painted by Diana Sperling in 1817 or 1818) shows a conventionally attired couple (proprietor and servant) stepping through the half-open doors of the house (its choice interior visible) into the rain to improve the garden (with potted flowers). These relationships at once offer an allegory for the character of English kinship as one might think of it in 1989 or 1990 and are cancelled by it.

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After nature: English kinship in the late twentieth century

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Foreword

Professor Marilyn Strathern delivered The Lewis Henry Morgan Lectures in 1989, with the general title ‘After Nature: English Kinship in the Late Twentieth Century’. The four lectures were ‘Diversity and Individuality’; ‘Relatives: Analogies for a Plural Culture’; ‘Persons: The Progress of a Polite Society’; and ‘Greenhouse Effect’. They were delivered on 14, 16, 21 and 23 February and are here made available in a suitably modified form.

The volume continues work carried on by Professor Strathern for over twenty years, the development of which is to be found in several books and many articles. The scope of her efforts is very broad, ranging ethnographically from England to Papua New Guinea, and engaging a number of central theoretical issues. Anthropologists who may have been tempted to conclude that British anthropology has little new to say will surely, faced with her work, wish to think again. For while it is clear that she is firmly based in British social anthropology, Professor Strathern breaks new ground, and nowhere so clearly as here.

The present volume underscores the fascination – and the complexity – of what Professor Strathern is doing. Different readers of the manuscript have characterised it in various ways, though attempts to categorise it simply must eventually fail. This is work that does not fit neatly into accepted categories. Attempts to pigeonhole it serve only to obscure its implications.

Nevertheless it is important to recognize some of the key elements in what is offered. Professor Strathern’s main concern is late twentieth-century English kinship, and her account is couched in cultural terms. In order to elucidate her material, much ethnographic data from elsewhere, particularly Melanesia, is set in relation to (and interaction with) the English data. As a result, we are presented with an exercise in comparison that is sophisticated, illuminating and powerful. Another integral part of the analysis is a demonstration of the ways in which English ideas about kinship are related to English ideas about other aspects of English society and how it works. The presentation of English kinship in combination with two carefully developed kinds of comparison – cross-cultural and internal to England – does more than illuminate English
kinship. It indicates a need to rethink our ideas about it and about more general matters as well.

As the first cultural account of English kinship by a British anthropologist, this volume will attract the attention of anthropologists generally. Scholars in other disciplines who monitor developments in anthropology will also find it well worth consideration. Readers will find enlightenment and stimulation. Whether as ethnography or as a fascinating example of complex theory (if these can be disambiguated), Professor Strathern’s present work is a major contribution to our understanding of the world and of how to understand it.

Alfred Harris, Editor
The Lewis Henry Morgan Lectures
Preface

This is an exercise in cultural imagination – with respect both to its principal subject matter (English kinship) and to the discipline which is my enabling technology (social anthropology). True to the personifying idioms of each, I wish to demonstrate how ideas behave.

I must acknowledge inspiration from the few works of which it will be seen I make extensive use, not just for their materials but for their interpretations and analyses. They serve to demonstrate my interest in the procedures by which those with a concept of culture make ‘culture’ explicit to themselves. As a consequence, though, the reader should be warned about the status of primary information in this study. Observations about the English or about kinship are treated as ethnographically continuous with the secondary observations derived from the analytical and interpretive works. The arguments I cite from other scholars thus carry their own, and illustrative, burden of cultural evidence. As a result, the account can not pretend to a history or a sociology, though it incorporates what otherwise would comprise historical and sociological data; nor can it pretend to a history of ideas; and the apparent ascription of attitudes and beliefs to this or that set of persons should not be mistaken for a study of what people think or feel.

It has its own limitations. A problem that besets anthropologists-at-home is that the outcome may not even look like a cultural account. One has become used to mini-ethnographies or social histories or the sociologies of subcultures, whereas what I offer here is a methodological scandal by any of those standards. The difficulty lies, one might say, less in its distance from such genres than in its inevitable proximity to them. Or, to borrow from Paul Rabinow’s introduction to French Modern (1989), ‘while the whole may seem too complex, the parts may seem too simple’.

The original format of The Lewis Morgan Lectures is preserved in the four principal chapters. I owe the invitation to give the Lectures to Professor Alfred Harris and the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Rochester. Those who have enjoyed the privilege in the past will know what I also owe them for their hospitality: I can only thank Grace and Alfred Harris
Preface

for their especial kindness, and the Department for their stimulation. With an extension of time and critical attention that was a privilege in itself, members of the Anthropology Department and of Women’s Studies at the University of Virginia also heard the full set of lectures.

I should add that the book was finished in June 1990. Since then the Warnock Report, to which several references are made, has become the basis of legislation, although I make no mention of this. There has also been a change in the British premiership. While it would have been in keeping to have retained the original text, this would have sounded odd, and I have made the appropriate alterations.

Several colleagues have read the manuscript, and they are thanked warmly for their comments and criticisms: Anthony Cohen, Frederick Damon, Jeanette Edwards, Sarah Franklin, Jane Haggis, Eric Hirsch, Frances Price, Nigel Rapport, Tim Swindlehurst and Nicholas Thomas, as are the Press’s readers. Jean Ashton has also taken care of it in her own inimitable way. I should add that where ‘n.d.’ appears in the bibliography, I am grateful for permission to cite as yet unpublished work.

David Schneider is the anthropological father of this book, since it is both with and against his ideas on kinship that it is written; his reactions have been characteristically incisive and generous. Another colleague, Joyce Evans, is the mother of this book, since it is from her Englishness that I write; her love and knowledge of nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature have kept me culturally on track. She is also my mother in the literal sense, and my thanks are also filial.

Marilyn Strathern
Manchester
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