CHAPTER 1

Edmund Leach (1910–1989): achievements

Edmund Ronald Leach was born in Sidmouth, Devon, England, on November 7, 1910. He went to school at Marlborough College and later entered Clare College, Cambridge, as an exhibitioner and read mathematics and mechanical sciences, obtaining a first class BA degree in 1932.

After some years of civilian life in China he returned to England and studied social anthropology under Bronislaw Malinowski and Raymond Firth at the London School of Economics. He was an active member of Malinowski's famous seminar. An abortive field trip to Kurdistan in 1938, frustrated by the Munich crisis,[1] was followed by a prolonged trip to Burma in 1939 in the course of which the Second World War broke out. From fall 1939[2] to the summer of 1945 he served with distinction as an officer in the Burma Army. He saw much of northern Burma, and he gained an unrivaled knowledge of its hill tribes, particularly the Kachin, on whom he was an undisputed authority.

Leach gained his Ph.D. from the London School of Economics in 1947 where he also obtained his first teaching appointment. He carried out a survey in Sarawak and his report entitled *Social Science Research in Sarawak* (1950) set out the guidelines for subsequent investigations by a number of distinguished anthropologists (particularly Derek Freeman, William Geddes, and Stephen Morris).

Edmund Leach[3] relinquished a readership at the LSE in 1953 in order to return to Cambridge as lecturer (1953–58). In 1954 he published

[1] On the basis of this aborted field trip, Leach wrote *Social and Economic Organization of Rowanduz Kurds*, London School of Economics Monographs on Social Anthropologyn, no. 3, London, 1940.

[2] Although recruited in 1939, he was allowed to continue with his fieldwork and he did not begin active service until 1941. He volunteered to join the Second Burma Rifles and was involved in the British retreat from the Japanese. He later commanded the Kachin irregular forces behind the enemy lines.

[3] He disliked his middle name Ronald and he did not use it. But he always used the initials E.R.L.

Political Systems of Highland Burma which embodied some of the results of his work in Burma. A field trip to Ceylon in 1953 provided the information for a second work of distinction: *Pul Eliya, A Village in Ceylon* (1961). He was in due course promoted Reader at Cambridge, and in 1972 the university honored him by appointing him to a personal chair. His research and writing vigorously continued throughout his career, despite mounting administrative and other responsibilities.

Leach's escalating academic recognition was signposted by his winning twice the Curl Essay Prize (1951, 1957) and the Rivers Memorial Medal (1958). He delivered the Malinowski Memorial Lecture (1959), the Henry Myers Lecture (1966), the Mason Memorial Lecture (1970), the Cantor Lectures at the Royal Society of Arts (1973), the Munro Lectures at the University of Edinburgh (1977), and the Huxley Memorial Lecture (1980). He spent a year in the United States in 1961 as a Fellow of the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, Stanford, and a term at the Johns Hopkins University in 1976 as John Hinkley Visiting Professor. He was the first and only anthropologist so far invited by the BBC to deliver the Reith Lectures (*A Runaway world?* 1967) which notably brought him to the attention of the general public.

In the United States, Edmund Leach delivered the Lewis Henry Morgan Lectures at The University of Rochester in 1975, the John Hinkley Lectures at the Johns Hopkins University in 1976, the Harvey Lecture Series, University of New Mexico (1983), and the Patten Foundation Lectures (1984–85) at Indiana University. I have most likely missed some other instances, but one might say that Leach accomplished a grand slam of distinguished lectures on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean.

Leach's wide-ranging substantial contributions to knowledge are attested by his impressive bibliography.[4] It is no exaggeration to say that in sheer versatility, originality, and range of writing he was and still is difficult to match among the anthropologists of the English-speaking world. His contributions have touched on kinship and social organization; hill tribes and valley peoples; land tenure and peasant economy; caste and class; myth and ritual; binary thought, classification, and liminality; information theory, semiotics, and symbolic communication; art and aesthetics; ethology and archeology; computer technology and model building; British structural-functional method and the

[4] See Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, *Edmund Leach: A Bibliography*, Occasional Paper, no. 42, 1990.

structuralism of Lévi-Strauss; biblical materials and the myths of classical Greece.

Altogether Leach was the author of some eight books, co-author of one, and editor of several essay collections. A hallmark of all his writings was a forceful, vigorous, direct and clear prose, effective in exposition as in debate. He was a tireless reviewer of books in anthropology and a variety of cognate disciplines, and a prolific essayist not only in professional journals but also in publications for the general reading public such as *The Listener*, *New Society*, *New Scientist*, *The Spectator*, *Encounter*, *The Times Literary Supplement*, *New York Review of Books*, *London Review of Books*, and *New Republic*. He in fact wrote for and spoke to a much wider public and audience than the vast majority of social anthropologists are prone to, and positively sought to have a dialogue with specialists in other disciplines. All this added to his fame in mature years both as a notable spokesman for the discipline and as a commentator on general contemporary issues.

Apart from a distinguished academic career as a social anthropologist, Edmund Leach rendered noteworthy services to education, knowledge and professional societies in general. In 1966, he succeeded Lord Annan as Provost of King's College, a college which counts among its twentieth-century luminaries Lord Maynard Keynes, E.M. Forster, Goldsworthy Lowes-Dickinson, Rupert Brooke, Arthur Waley, Arthur Cecil Pigou and Lord Kaldor. As Provost of King's until 1979, he also served as Fellow of Eton College. In addition to being head of a famous college, he served at the highest levels in the administration of the university itself. His fellow anthropologists honored him by electing him Chairman of the Association of Social Anthropologists (1966–70) and President of the Royal Anthropological Institute (1971–75). His gaining a wider academic recognition was signified by his election as President of the British Humanist Association (1970) and as a Fellow of the British Academy (1972). He was a member of the Social Sciences Research Council for a number of years beginning in 1968, and was elected Honorary Fellow of the London School of Economics (1974), Honorary Fellow of the School of Oriental and African Studies (1974), Honorary Fellow of Clare College (1986), and Foreign Honorary Member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (1968).

A high point of Leach's career was reached when he was knighted in 1975, and also elected a trustee of the British Museum (1975–80). In 1976 the University of Chicago conferred on him the honorary degree

of Doctor of Humane Letters, and Brandeis University honored him in the same way.

This enumeration of achievements might unproblematically convey the idea that Leach by virtue of his own capacities, his social background, comfortable circumstances, public schooling and Cambridge education, and his considerable writings quite naturally ascended the ladder of achievement to become a much honored member of the British Establishment. However, the canonized Leach himself would not have settled for a hagiographic narrative, nor did he want himself to be considered as aspiring and conforming to the career of an honors list grandee. We have before us a complex person, subject to tensions and frustrations, blessed with a creative experimental and reflexive mind that was more concerned with restlessly probing than with consolidating knowledge. While he tested the presuppositions and limits of orthodoxy, he was deeply protective and conservationist about the institutions he valued.

Consider these examples where Leach "deconstructs" and subverts himself while in doing so he also makes a social commentary:

Adam Kuper wrote in *New Society* in January 1987, in one of the unusually informal, humorous and revealing interviews he had with him: "Professor Sir Edmund Leach – knight, former Provost of King's . . . establishment figure incarnate now – says that when he has to revise his entry in *Who's Who* he always roars with laughter. 'Who is this comic clown? There I am, aged 76, with all this long list of honours. The whole hierarchy of the establishment – the good and the great – is a joke. But I use it. And why not? I still have (academic) political objectives.' " One should of course not miss the pride behind this comic stance.

Another window on to Leach's scheme of evaluations and what he thought was worth working for is provided by his reply (dated July 21, 1975) to my own letter to him congratulating him on his knighthood: "The Knighthood has elicited an enormous shower of mail from people all over the world, some of whom I haven't seen for forty years! On the other hand, my appointment as a Trustee of the British Museum, which is really much more distinguished but for which I have to do some work, though likewise announced in *The Times*, did not produce a single letter!" In his own distinctive way, he celebrated and turned to anthropological advantage his elevation by giving a witty and perceptive lecture on the ritual of investiture as knight. Again at the University of Chicago in the following year, as I walked beside him in the academic procession to the neo-Gothic Rockefeller Chapel where he would receive his honorary

doctorate, Leach chuckled and directed my attention to the order of the procession: on the way to the chapel the president of the university with the candidates for the honor were last in position and to enter, and no doubt when the ceremony concluded, they would be at the head of the departing procession: a little lesson to me on processional order, entry, and exit, and the marking of status hierarchy.

CHAPTER 2

Childhood and youth

WEB OF KINSHIP

Especially toward the end of his life, Leach more easily, informatively, and "ethnographically" spoke for the public record of his early family life and regarded it as having both shaped his later life and posed problems for it. An interview with Adam Kuper in 1986 (in the writing of which Leach himself took an authorial role) begins with the statement that "An autobiographical interview must begin with family mythology rather than history," and includes the observation that "Even in childhood I thought of the world as consisting exclusively of kinsmen and family domestics, a good start for an anthropologist."[1] We shall make liberal use of this interview in which he sketched his family background as a descendant of closely intermarried Rochdale mill-owners.

It however emerges with pleasant surprise that the experience of his extended family life, and reflection upon its significance, was not a remembrance of things past in old age but had been a long introspective preoccupation, about which some fifty-five years previously he had dwelt at some length in his letters to Rosemary Firth, a long-time friend since teen age with whom he corresponded when he was an undergraduate at Cambridge.[2] On January 10, 1931, he had written to her "as partly an autobiographical essay" about his "family and social class background" (as well as his "undergraduate experiences in Cambridge"). For someone who described himself as "inward and self conscious," the Victorian art and hobby of letterwriting which he enjoyed was a way of clarifying matters for himself through dialogue, and Rosemary Firth surmises that the long letters written to her were written at a time "when – as he told

[1] Adam Kuper, "An Interview with Edmund Leach," *Current Anthropology*, vol. 27, no. 4, August–October 1986, p. 375.
[2] Rosemary Firth, "A Cambridge Undergraduate: Some Early Letters from Edmund Leach," *Cambridge Anthropology. Special Issue: Sir Edmund Leach*, vol. 13, no. 3, 1989–90, pp. 9–18.

me later – he was just beginning to formulate ideas of his own and break away from family influences."[3]

In the autobiographical letter of January 1931, in an irreverent vein, but nevertheless probing the past in order to situate himself, Leach had the following to say about his family and social class, which is worth reproducing as a fuller variant of his 1986 sketch (it is remarkable that both sketches reproduce virtually the same details, in proof of a long memory):

To know me you have simply got to know something of my family history . . . I had 6 great-grandparents[4] instead of the more usual number, and they were all "in cotton". That is to say, by a process of exploitation that would not be even dreamed of by the most ambitious of present-day industrialists, they proceeded to amass very considerable fortunes at the expense of the unfortunate population of Lancashire. However, what with factory acts and so forth and the reduction of working hours from 16–12, cotton ceased to boom or at any rate it didn't boom quite so loud, and when my father [born 1851] left school my grandfather had quite decided that the country was ruined (which was remarkably far-sighted of him). So my father instead of going into cotton went to NZ – perhaps rather an extreme alternative!

My father was one of 10 brothers (+3 sisters)[5] – (these Victorians were so prolific) and all educated at Marlborough.[6] After the first five had been in the cricket XI I fancy the rest got in automatically, but there it was, for nearly 20 years there was always a Leach in the Marlborough XI. Now if you understand cricket you know quite a lot about all these brothers. Cricket is a game that requires phenomenal patience, it develops that peculiarity the team spirit, and that entirely erroneous theory that an english [*sic*] public-school boy is a gentleman the world over.

However cotton was slumping when the third brother left school, and the rest of them were scattered all over the world – pioneers of the empire and the rest of it, but they took their cricket bats with them! Eventually one of them struck gold in the Argentine – it wasn't gold really, it was sugar. A really benighted spot 1,000 miles up country [from Buenos Aires] four days by pack horse from nearest railway station. However the team spirit prevailed – the brothers [actually six of them] assembled from the four quarters of the globe and began to work like galley slaves. It was all cricket of course, but it lasted nearly 15 years. At the end of that time they suddenly found themselves rich and growing richer, they

[3] Ibid., p. 10.

[4] Edmund Leach subsequently established that he had eight grandparents, and sometime in the 1980s had a chart compiled of his correct pedigree.

[5] According to Louisa Brown, née Leach (pers. comm.), Edmund Leach's father was one of eleven brothers (one of whom, Sidney by name, died very young) and two sisters.

[6] Aside from Sidney who died early, the two oldest sons may not have attended Marlborough according to Louisa's surmise.

merely had to sit down and take it easy; actually, they continued to work like blazes, but my arrival [1910] was an ill-omen for the sugar trade, the industry has been slipping ever since. The tragedy of a soap bubble. All very romantic of course, but it explains one or two things about myself; I and the whole of my generation of the Leach family suffer from "wander-lust". Not a single one of them has remained at home. We still want to play the pioneer although there be no more happy hunting grounds for the adventurers.

I have inherited another quality from the Leach side of the family, an odd way of being Rebel and High Tory at the same time. I can't quite explain what I mean by this, it's Lancashire ancestry I think; you'll understand it when you know me better. [It is worth noting here that Rochdale, the place of origin of the Leach family, was the home of the Cooperative Movement which it appears influenced the thinking of Edmund's father and possibly also himself. It is also relevant to mention that the Rochdale Pioneers, who were rebels, steadfastly loyal to one another, may have influenced the Leach family.]

And now for the other side of my family; my Mother's father was also "in cotton"; but you could hardly imagine two types more entirely different than my F. and M. My Father is all patience, a patience that on the one hand leads almost to obstinacy, and the other to an almost total absence of anger.

My Mother is all emotion, almost fantastically idealist in theory, and yet surprisingly practical. She is one of these people who do about 15 things at once and get them all finished. But I can't explain my mother; I don't properly understand her myself.

I have inherited from her a temper not too well controlled, an inquisitiveness that wants to understand something about everything; any elements of the aesthetic that may turn up here and there, and that cursed blessedness, imagination.[7]

There are many complex and multivalent themes and tensions suggested by the autobiographical sketches quoted above, and also further extended in other writings.[8]

The family home was Harridge, "located in (or near)" Rochdale, Lancashire. It was established by his grandfather Robert Leach, "wealthy flannel manufacturer, a product of the English industrial revolution."[9] Robert Leach and his wife, grandparents on the father's side, were married in 1844, and had thirteen children. This Robert Leach was the nephew of another Robert Leach, founder of the family fortune, who is alleged to have left a will dated 1816.[10]

[7] Firth, "A Cambridge Undergraduate," pp. 13–14.
[8] Such as Edmund Leach, "Masquerade: The Presentation of the Self in Holi-Day Life," *Cambridge Anthropology. Special Issue: Sir Edmund Leach*, vol. 13, no. 3, 1989–90, pp. 47–69.
[9] Ibid., p. 63.
[10] This at least was the date of his will; he apparently died intestate and his will was according to Leach probably forged. Ibid.

"It was characteristic of the class of such industrialists that within any local area, they were all closely intermarried and that they had enormous families. All four of my great grandfathers were mill owners who lived within four miles of one another. They were all related by marriage. One of them had 17 children. My mother's father's mother was one of 11 siblings." Louisa Brown, Edmund Leach's daughter, has informed me that her father's "family was and still is quite extraordinary in extended family connections. He [Edmund] had twenty eight first cousins, all of whom he knew, descended from some of the eleven brothers and two sisters, children of Robert and Mary Leach, his grandparents who died ten years before he was born."[11]

It is not far-fetched to surmise that Edmund's strong sense of a dense network of closely intermarried kin, whose local endogamy was made immediate, real, and earthy by their "class interest" in fusing and conserving their industrial fortunes, would inform his later professional interpretation of kinship morality and norms, groupings and alliances, as grounded in *ancestral* concerns and interests, in terms of property, debt obligations, and honor as "intangible wealth." This same sense also informed his view of "individuals" (placed within such a network of relations and norms) as manipulating and strategizing to perpetuate and expand these advantages – a view that would subsequently be in partial accord with Malinowski's self-interested individuals, and in greater accord with Raymond Firth's articulation of the notion of "social organization" (in contrast to "social structure") to signify the outcome of individuals pragmatically using and manipulating their positions within the parameters of their social existence. We shall in due course see how Leach would try to undermine attempts by certain anthropologists to essentialize kinship as a thing in itself and as having an autonomous self-referential basis.

We note how Leach subverts the picture of the local world of Victorian bourgeois stability by reference to the changing fortunes of the extended family, and the dispersal of his cricket-playing father and the majority of his brothers[12] in search of their fortunes in the far-flung empire, with six of them regrouping with the zest and loyalty of cricketers to make their fortune in sugar in Argentina, and when that bubble burst, their

[11] It is also in the same essay, "Masquerade," that commenting on a photograph of "the Chadwick brothers," Leach meticulously details the kinship ties (and gender values) surrounding the persons in the picture.

[12] Three brothers, John, Robert, and Harold, did not go abroad. Robert was a clergyman, and John worked all his life in his father's business, John Leach & Son.

return to England with their brood.[13] Leach credits his own wanderlust to this imperial and colonial entrepreneurial and civilizing past, and he revealingly attributed to this kind of "Lancashire ancestry" his "odd way of being Rebel and High Tory at the same time," the permissible dissenter within the ranks of Establishment, one of the keys to his life and work.

A brief sketch of William Edmund Leach (1851–1932), father of Edmund Leach, is relevant here. I owe this account to Louisa Brown who did not know him personally. Very little is known about WEL, known as Lens to his contemporaries and peers and as Uncle Billy by his numerous nephews and nieces. He was the fourth in age and also the fourth son among the thirteen children of Robert and Mary Leach. He has been described as being extremely intelligent and remarkably handsome from a very early age. He went to Marlborough and was a star sportsman, excelling in cricket.

After leaving school William took a boat to New Zealand. He traveled around Australasia, mainly in New Zealand, for a number of years, before leaving for Argentina in 1883 because his brother Roger had informed him of the excellent business prospects there. He became Chairman of the Leaches Argentine Estates, initially a very successful sugar business with lands the size of the English county of Surrey and a factory to refine the sugar cane (that still exists and operates) known as La Esperanza, not far from the town of Jujuy, in the northernmost state in Argentina, 1,000 miles from the capital Buenos Aires. William spent many years in Argentina and was always at the center of both business and social occasions.

His mother and father died within months of each other in 1900. Soon afterwards he married. It was not a love match: it has been suggested that Mildred, who had previously been very much in love with one of her cousins, was initially not at all happy about her engagement to a man very much older than herself and with whom she had very few interests in common. Being extremely dutiful, however, she took on her duties as a wife very seriously and became as interested and dedicated to the Leach family as to her husband.

It is not known why William Edmund Leach married so late, or, indeed, why he married when he did, presumably having nothing to compel

[13] In fact not all the Leaches returned to England. It seems that, although the majority of about 70 percent came back, the rest remained behind in Argentina, and their Spanish-speaking fully Argentinean descendants continue that affiliation. The Leaches Argentine Estates were nationalized by the Perón regime.