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## Hempenstall, Peter. Truth's Fool: Derek Freeman and the War over Cultural Anthropology, Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2017.

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**Hempenstall, Peter. *Truth's Fool: Derek Freeman and the War over Cultural Anthropology*, Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2017.**

Peter Hempenstall has written a good book—well researched, well documented, and presented with measured tone and clarity of thought and expression. Does he shed new light on *Derek Freeman and the War over Cultural Anthropology*? I believe he does.

Hempenstall is an accomplished biographer and historian of European colonialism in the Pacific—especially the Samoan islands. From his academic positions in New Zealand and Australia—including a fellowship at the Australian National University where his office was down the corridor from Freeman's—Hempenstall was an interested and knowledgeable observer of Derek Freeman and the Freeman-Mead debates. He had no interaction with Freeman or with Freeman's critics during that time, however, and he was never involved in the debates regarding cultural anthropologist Margaret Mead. In short, he wades into this arena unburdened by personal or professional baggage. Hempenstall sets the scene in that arena:

In his attack on the early career findings of Mead, and in his passionate rejection of cultural determinism and relativism, Freeman opened fresh wounds in the century-long disagreements over nature versus nurture.

He was also a polarizing figure. The style with which he asserted his views, the vehemence of his replies to opponents, and the unyielding quality of his mission to prove Mead wrong alienated many anthropologists. Such fervor had its roots deep in his own past and personality, but his aggression also had to do with the way many anthropologists dealt with his unorthodox ideas and behavior. The profession seemed to round as one on Freeman in two decades of vituperative debate (p. 5).

In *Truth's Fool*, Hempenstall successfully takes on the role of “fair-minded” observer (pp. 101, 184, 209, 224) applying “a biographer's perspective and the historian's tools to excavate the muddy waters of the Freeman-Mead debates” (p. xi). The book has two interconnected goals. The first is to write a biography and intellectual history of Derek Freeman and the controversies he ignited (p. xi). This is straightforward for an historian, and Hempenstall handles it well. The second goal is an “appraisal of the controversy” itself (*ibid*). That is trickier for an academic outsider, but in the unavoidable tradeoff between the advantages of insider knowledge versus those of outsider objectivity, Hempenstall rewards us by handling the academic issues competently and the appraisals judiciously. As he argues, “looking for winners and losers in this psychological free-for-all does not advance our understanding” (p. 100).

Hempenstall's appraisal of the arguments and counterarguments steps lightly over the underlying issue concerning human nature that both Mead and Freeman took to be the core issue, but the Freeman-Mead debate itself failed to tackle that issue head on. The reason for this failure seems to be threefold. First, although Freeman was right that Mead's early work in Samoa was historically pivotal in launching cultural determinism as an academic and cultural ideology, it was never the intellectual lynchpin that Freeman took it to be. Presenting his refutation of Mead's work as if it was the lynchpin sent the debate into a thicket of side issues from the start. Second, Freeman had little constructive insight to add to the debate over human nature other than his cogent but vague claims about human choice behavior. Finally, Freeman's critics themselves offered little of substance in support of their counter claims about human nature, and they were thus readily diverted to side issues where they were armed too often with “false assertions and misrepresentations” (p. 184).

Hempenstall's primary goal is biographical. He wants to “analyze the ideas, motivations, and personal and professional intentions that underlay Derek Freeman's various quests” in order to “add necessary, rounded dimensions to an understanding of Freeman's

harsh intellectualism and eccentric personality” (*ibid*, p. 10). The book’s title, *Truth’s Fool*, is central to that understanding, for “Freeman proudly boasted he was ‘Truth’s Fool,’ by which he meant that, like the medieval fool at a royal court, he had the temerity to prick the illusions of his master” (p. 6). Hempenstall quotes Freeman’s own comment in offering “truth’s fool” as his role in life: “I think scientific truth is sort of like a god to me” (p. 130). This in itself was enough to trigger a collective snarl from a discipline that had largely come to assert that claims of “scientific truth” were just insidious political arguments.

Hempenstall’s sources include the excerpts, notes, and comments that Don Tuzin—initially Freeman’s student and then his colleague and close friend—made after Freeman’s death from the diary Freeman kept each day starting in 1963. Tuzin’s excerpts and notes cover the years from 1963 to 1990, which was the last year of the diary Tuzin was able to complete before Tuzin himself died. Tuzin shared Freeman’s hope that access to his diary would underpin a “no-nonsense, objective appraisal of Freeman the man and the anthropologist” (p. 13), and that is what Hempenstall delivers.

Hempenstall provides carefully researched accounts of three great but temporary emotional and psychological crises in Freeman’s life. The first occurred in Sarawak in 1961 following a clash with Tom Harrisson. The second occurred in Melbourne in 1965 following Freeman’s presentation to a psychoanalysis conference of a paper critical of Freud—for which Freeman was verbally attacked and ostracized. Following this episode, Freeman was apparently hospitalized, given electroshock treatment, and then put on tranquilizers (p. 98). The third crisis occurred in Manu’a in 1967 following closely upon Freeman’s conclusion from local testimony about Mead’s behavior while she was a resident there that Mead’s account of Samoan sexual behavior was “a *projection* on to Samoan females of her *own* sexual experiences as a young woman” (p. 107, quoting Freeman, original emphasis).

In 1974, Freeman was diagnosed as suffering from bipolar disorder for which he took medication until the following year (pp. 134, 136). In August of 1975, Freeman wrote in his diary: “I have no doubt that I am an individual prone to manic-depressive affective reactions and that I have been undergoing one of these reactions since last March” (p. 136).

Hempenstall notes that Freeman’s “academic life was speckled with incendiary encounters and comments,” but his diaries show that he “strove constantly against the more negative effects of his sometimes unsettling behavior” and that he was engaged in a “constant struggle for mental equilibrium” (pp. 131, 137, 138). The diaries show that “self-doubt assailed him, though he was careful to mask it” (p. 118). Hempenstall writes that Freeman’s “colleagues and opponents saw little or nothing of this interior struggle, but the therapeutic search for who he was and could be, where his negative drives originated, and how he could rid himself of them was real, arduous, and permanent” (p. 138).

Hempenstall concludes that, on the weight of evidence covering most of Freeman’s adult life, a diagnosis of ‘madness’ is unnecessary (p. 108). He examines these matters closely for the purpose of understanding Derek Freeman, the person, whereas Freeman’s critics more often carried out such analyses for the purpose of attacking and undermining both the person and his arguments. Hempenstall notes that “the attribution of ‘madness’ stops all further questioning” (p. 141). It is the ultimate *ad hominem* argument. What Hempenstall finds instead and attempts to correct is what he calls a “new mythology” about Freeman “the wrecker, the cheat, the monster” that critics have built up “based on half truths and outright falsehoods” (p. 254).

In assessing Freeman’s intellectual contributions, Hempenstall observes that Freeman repeatedly “became obsessed with the One Big Idea and insisted on preparing himself to pursue it with relentless scientific study. Yet he failed to bring any of these ideas to a resolution” (p. 250). The most vexing of these failures involved Freeman’s clarion call over several decades for anthropologists to develop a “unified science of humanity” that somehow

linked biology and culture (p. 81). Hempenstall is not alone in observing that Freeman's solution, an "anthropology of choice," remained no more than "a vision, rather than a concrete, testable possibility, at least in his hands" (p. 239).

It seems apparent that while Freeman saw *that* the "answer lay in linking biology and culture through human choice behavior" (*ibid*), he never saw *how* to link them. In the end, his forays into psychoanalysis, ethology, philosophy, and sociobiology all ended in cul-de-sacs. When he first launched himself on this quest in the 1960s, he was well ahead of his time, as he claimed, but he was perhaps also too early in the application of evolutionary biology to the explanation of human affairs for him to find a proper foothold. By the 1980s and 1990s when *Margaret Mead and Samoa* and *The Fateful Hoaxing of Margaret Mead* were published, Freeman had become too obsessed with "the Mead thing" to take advantage of the rapid advances then blossoming in that field.

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