

OBITUARY

ANDREW DUFF-COOPER

23 December 1947–4 August 1991

WHETHER Andrew Duff-Cooper would have wanted an obituary, any more than he wanted a funeral, is disputed, but his response to a notice of this kind would surely have been complex. He might have expostulated at the etymological implication, on the ground that he was certain he was descending nowhere, and he would have found it diverting that the derivation of the English verb 'to die' is unresolved and that by one hypothesis the original OE word itself died. What is sure is that he felt no disquiet at the imminence of his death, any more than he had any regret for the life that had conduced to it. He declared not long before, and with patent sincerity, that if he had foreseen the known outcome of the kind of life he had led he would have behaved in no other way. He did care, however, about dying while he still had so much to do and with profound problems unsettled. On a professional score this was indeed lamentable, and his death is a singular loss to scholarship as well as to his friends and colleagues.

Duff-Cooper came into social anthropology at Oxford later than the usual graduate and by a divagatious route. He was born in 1947, in Hampshire, and on leaving public school did not go to university but worked in a London insurance office. This lasted only a year, before he went to live in France and Spain, studying the languages, for the next two years. After that he again worked for a year in an office, this time in real estate in Geneva. In 1972 he returned to England, entered the College of Law, London, and passed Part I of the solicitors' qualifying examination. Then, the turning-point in his professional life, he entered the University of Kent in 1973, at the age of twenty-six, to read first law and then

sociology and philosophy; he graduated in 1976. The impression he had made at Canterbury gained him entry to the University of Oxford, where he was accepted by the Institute of Social Anthropology and awarded a four-year post-graduate scholarship by the then Social Science Research Council. It was especially valuable to him that, at the instance of his supervisor, he became a member of Merton College, and with that privilege, as he rightly saw it, his new life of steady dedication to research began. He was delighted by his college, and he responded to the ambience and resources of Oxford with a romantic enthusiasm. Termly reports by his supervisor testified to his quick intelligence, application, and originality. After the Diploma (since restyled M.St.) in Social Anthropology, he undertook for the first research degree (B.Litt., since M.Litt.) the editing of an unpublished book on totemism by Andrew Lang, together with a critical commentary and an account of the book's place in the history of ideas. In just one year he transcribed and established the text, in a volume of 435 pages, accompanied by another volume of editorial matter of comparable length. The succeeding year (1978-79) was spent at the University of Leiden in preparation for field research in Indonesia; and between 1979 and 1981 he studied, by a bold choice, Balinese living not on Bali itself but on the neighbouring island of Lombok.

The twenty-one months that he spent in Pagutan seem to have been the acme of his life. He responded with justified romanticism to the Balinese and to their ordered way of life, he submitted himself as a novice to a revered priest, and he formed a close friendship among Balinese youth. Lack of money brought him back to Europe sooner than he had wished, in 1981. He spent a year at Oxford (as a University of Oxford Bagby Scholar and with a grant from the Radcliffe-Brown Memorial Fund), and the next at the University of Leiden (with a Netherlands Government scholarship) under the direction of Professor de Josselin de Jong. In 1983 he passed the Oxford D.Phil. examination with a thesis on the collective ideas of a community of Balinese on Lombok, but, in the increasingly straitened circumstances of the universities, he could find no academic employment until 1985, when, at the initiative of Professor Teigo Yoshida, he was awarded a fellowship from the Japan Foundation, combined with a visiting lecturership at Keio University. This opportunity made for another ardent commitment. He was fascinated by Japan, and he found a sympathetic reception that culminated in another close and enduring friendship. Professionally, too, he gained a new security, with an assistant professorship at Seitoku Gakuen College in 1987, followed by a professorship at Seitoku University in 1990. Apart from the tenure of a Cosmos senior research fellowship at the University of Edinburgh (in the academic year 1989-90), and trips abroad to conferences, he resided in Japan almost until his death, and he intended to return there after a vacation in America and the U.K. in July and August 1991. At the end of July, while on the east coast of the U.S., he suffered a grave decline in a long-standing physical debility and flew at once to London, entering the Westminster Hospital. An abrupt collapse led

to his death, from amoebic dysentery, at the age of forty-three, on Sunday, 4 August 1991.

This calamity terminated a scholarly career of outstanding productivity and promise. In the seven years since 1983 Duff-Cooper had put into print 61 publications, most of these being long and intricate analyses; at the time of his death, a further nine had been announced as forthcoming. Most of the articles are concerned with Balinese metaphysics and cosmology, within the frame of their way of life, and several have to do with Japan. What is characteristic of them is their depth of analysis and, concomitantly, a theoretical generality that makes them intellectually suggestive beyond their ethnographic pertinence. Duff-Cooper had only to be struck by an analytical concept or operation, and very quickly he would apply it to ethnographic evidences, Balinese in the first place, and systematically work out its full application in that context. This is most readily seen in his essays focusing on duality, symmetry, asymmetry, reflexivity, reversal, and similarly abstract themes. If he encountered no more than an epigraph taken from a source with which he was not familiar, such as Plotinus or Weyl, he would straightaway follow it up and extract from the original a new application to his Balinese findings, intended usually to make a theoretical point such as could be applied to social facts more generally. Such a description of his manner of work may make it seem that he was doing no more than social anthropology, or comparativism, is meant to do. This is correct enough, but the essential point is that Duff-Cooper actually did it, with unremitting scholarly diligence, imaginative analysis, and rapidity of execution throughout a long series of publications.

His writings have a tone that is distinctive in both thought and style. The argument advanced is usually demanding, if only because he was never trivial and would see in the most minor phenomena (e.g. beetle-matches on Bali) aspects that were major and even universal. Sometimes the train of exposition is hard to follow, even tortuous. For the most part this is because the subject-matter calls for intense thought, to the point sometimes (as for instance with the concept of degrees of asymmetry) of appearing intractable. To some extent, especially in the earlier publications, the difficulty is also a matter of prose style. Duff-Cooper admired Hocart, but for some time he could not (or at any rate did not) write as directly as Hocart did. His prose could be toilsome and even ornate, highlighted by personal phrases that some readers might have thought dispensable. He found a quasi-technical satisfaction in a proliferation of footnotes, many of which had not their ordinary ancillary function but were instead intimations of his irrepressible inquisitiveness at the peripheries of his topic. Such features could impart a rather self-conscious air to what he wrote, and indeed his essays were contrived, but in the best of senses; that is, they were devised with skill in order to convey a case with due art and impact. Successively, moreover, his publications tended to become plainer, not as a concession to the captious (which he would have despised to make) but as a result of deliberate discipline. A recent example, and one all the more effective by reason of its intricacy, is his article 'Sculpturing Balinese Ideology' (*JASO*, Vol. XXI, no. 3) which formulates profound considerations about

representation. It is systematic, cogently constructed, and scintillates with ingenuity, yet the exposition is direct and, taken with due attentiveness, readily comprehensible.

It would not be simple, in the suddenness of this occasion and with regard to an abbreviated career, to evaluate as a whole the contributions made by Duff-Cooper's work. His ethnography of Balinese culture, and of Japanese, is persuasive and instructive but must be left to the assessment of experts. The resort to certain formal concepts is admirable and illuminating; the analyses show how a scholarly and highly intelligent mind can discern deep modes of order in exotic evidences, and at the same time they can be seen as validating basic predicates of ideology and of interpretation. These were Duff-Cooper's aims, and they make his writings an unusual source of theoretical inspiration.

The personality behind this endeavour was yet more profound but left a medley of strong impressions not always consonant with the seriousness and discipline of the anthropological work. Duff-Cooper was of average stature and quite lightly built, with close-cropped hair, old-fashioned spectacles, and dark, almost Levantine, eyes glinting with cleverness and satirical appraisal. His manner was alert and often intense, marked by passages of temperamental fervour; his good humour and sense of the ridiculous could be broken by passionate protest, and conversation in his company was seldom less than lively. He had something of a taste for the untoward, and at the same time an excitable commitment to matters of principle. His sense of occasion was proper, yet neither in garb nor in bearing did he always fit the conventions of the event itself. Often one sensed a mocking distance, as when he would turn up dressed as a very pukka solicitor, with hard white collar, but wearing bovver boots. In the King's Arms, while discoursing in his clearly modulated voice on some recondite author or obscure point of argument, he would be rolling his own fags. No wonder he was so content to be at Oxford: it was just the place for him, and he would have been pleased that a colleague should think so. Whether Oxford requited his devotion, short of an obituary, is a question that he would have recognized as inappropriate to the place. One would give much, as so often now, to have his amused response to the judgement that his death is a hard misfortune for an intellectual tradition of which his work is a praiseworthy expression.

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A review by Andrew Duff-Cooper appears below (pp. 272-5)