



MARY DOUGLAS

Margaret Mary Douglas¹

1921–2007

Ending is different from completion, [...]; the first is difficult, and the second impossible. (Douglas 2007: xiii)

IT IS CONCEIVABLE that Mary Douglas was attracted to completion by the impossibility that she expressed epigrammatically in the last book published during her lifetime. But that would imbue her with a postmodern sensibility. More plausibly it was the other way around: the pull of completion, its conceivability, was so intense that its impossibility seemed incidental. Mary Douglas strove mightily to complete what increasingly she expressed to be a lifetime's project. She was not minded to celebrate impossibility or incompleteness, however limpidly her thoughts might on occasion be left open to her reader's construal. Intellectual challenges were put into the world to be faced and overcome.

¹I completed *Mary Douglas: an Intellectual Biography* (London, 1999) early in 1998. A supplementary bibliography to that account was published along with a reprint of my *Guardian* (18 May 2007) obituary of Mary Douglas in *Anthropology Today* (Oct. 2007, vol. 23, no. 5, 24–7). I subsequently read two sets of papers on which I draw here: Mary made me her literary executor, in which capacity I went through the papers and books in her Bloomsbury study; files of particular interest were sent to be archived at University College London (photographs to the British Museum). Most personal papers pre-dating 1985 had already been deposited in the Northwestern University Archives, Evanston, Illinois. I am grateful to the archivist Kevin Leonard for the generosity of his welcome when I visited in March 2009. Ian Brown helped with advice on colonial Burma.

A few readers brought to my attention minor corrections that ought to be made to the book, these I include here (with particular thanks to Sister Mary Coke and J. D. Y. Peel). Readers will notice my particular debt in this account to Janet Farnsworth, and to James and Philip Douglas, Mary and Jim's children, and to Pat Novy, Mary's sister.

Mary's retirement lasted almost a quarter of a century, quite long enough for her to fade pottering into obscurity. Yet what happened was diametrically, single-mindedly opposite: an increasing productivity well into her eighties; an unchallengeable position within British anthropology's most brilliant professional generation; and a generous reassessment within her own discipline of the work of her mid-career. Few could have predicted this outcome when in 1977 Mary resigned her professorship at University College London (UCL) in order to become Director of Research on Culture at the Russell Sage Foundation in New York. Fewer still as she found herself immediately mired in the controversial sacking of the man who had hired her. Yet she emerged from this fray with risk analysis added to the already formidable range of fields on which she wrote. No field of anthropology—religion, symbolism, politics, economics, cognition, to name only a few—was untouched by her ideas.

For all the challenges at the beginning and ending of any life, leave alone one straddling nine decades of rapid social change, Mary's is a life most easily narrated by relating its early events to its late achievements. As Mary herself seems to have realised, her middle years, the 'turn' between the setting out and coming home of her life were it thought of as a circle, is both the most important and the most problematic part of the story. So, I shall not set out this memoir sequentially, but instead move from her late to her early life and career, only coming finally to the middle years and to the two books that are generally considered her most important: *Purity and Danger* (1966) and *Natural Symbols* (1970).

In 1988, Mary Douglas returned permanently to London and to the solid, semi-detached-with-garage, Highgate family home she and Jim² had maintained for the decade or so spent in the United States. Formally she had retired in 1985 from the professorship she held at Northwestern University for four years, a position endowed in 1967 by the Avalon Foundation to foster the interdisciplinary study of the humanities. In Mary's case interdisciplinarity was satisfied by a joint appointment in the Department of Anthropology and the Department of the History and Literature of Religions. The second title could not have been more appropriate: using the techniques of social anthropology to reinterpret religious literature historically, with particular reference to the Pentateuch, was

²James (Jim) Alexandre Thomas Douglas born 22 July 1919 in Simla, where his father served with the Indian Army, died 22 Sept. 2004. The year before her death, Mary moved from the Highgate home in which she and Jim had lived since 1956 into a flat in Bloomsbury, close to UCL.

what Mary spent at least half of her retirement doing. However, as she noted herself, this nexus remained potential and not thoroughly explored during her Northwestern years. The threads began to come together during the two years she spent subsequent to retirement as a Visiting Professor at Princeton University from 1986 to 1988.³

Mary published about as much after 1985 as she had before, and this fell into two broad categories: restatements and extensions of her theoretical work, often written with collaborators, and typically focused on contemporary societies and social problems when substantive in character; and a specialist concern which involved her reinvention as an Old Testament scholar who wrote monograph-length reinterpretations of Numbers and Leviticus, as well as of the five books of the Pentateuch in their entirety, and of the Pentateuch in relation to other archaic writings. Several of these books and essays were the published versions of lectures given at invitations which increased in frequency as she retired. And along with the invitations came the honours, many of which retraced steps in her career. I think there were fourteen honorary degrees in all but may have missed some. The earliest were from Continental Europe: an honorary doctorate awarded by the University of Uppsala in 1986, and fellowship of Academia Europaea in 1988, the year of its foundation. The following year she was elected to Fellowship of the British Academy. 1992 transpired to be particularly productive with the award of a CBE as well as an Honorary Fellowship of her old college, St Anne's, Oxford. Distinguished Fellowship of UCL, her longest employer, followed in 1994; the Roehampton Institute, University of Surrey, which incorporated the surviving buildings of the Sacred Heart Convent, Mary's secondary school, honoured her in 1999; an Honorary Doctorate of the University of London 2001, and a Doctor of Letters of the University of Oxford 2003 followed. At the last was a DBE received at the Palace on 8 May 2007 in the company of three granddaughters and her carer eight days before Mary's death at 86.⁴

³Mary also fitted into this period her only return to the Lele after 1953. She was persuaded to revisit by Ngokwey Ndolamb, a Lele with whom she had communicated frequently by letter since he was a student in the 1970s (Northwestern University Archives, Box 1). By the 1980s, Ngokwey had embarked on a distinguished career with the United Nations which continues. Mary was shocked by the reports of anti-sorcery movements she collected, so delayed publication of the essay she wrote immediately on return because of its possible impact on those involved (see Douglas 1999b).

⁴With apologies for any I might have neglected, the other honorary degrees were awarded by Notre Dame, the Jewish Theological Seminary, the Universities of East Anglia, Essex, Warwick, Exeter, Oslo, and Pennsylvania, and Brunel University. Election to the American Academy of

Recognition mattered to Mary. For all the trials of ageing, the burdens of Jim's failing health and hearing, and of her final illness, this time gave her great satisfaction. In the terms of her repeated avowals of personal preference for hierarchical organisation based on complementary difference and on relative seniority, being junior was no bad thing if you respected your seniors and anticipated preferment in just measure and in due course. Attaining seniority was likewise relatively unproblematic, indeed the role of a retired anthropological mother superior was one at which Mary excelled. A life in culmination rather than fizzling out, and Mary, notwithstanding the opening epithet, loved a good ending.

Once it was published, Mary and I hardly spoke about my intellectual biography of her. But she repeated one story to me which also illustrates her delight in new figures of speech. In 2000, when she received an Honorary Degree of the University of Pennsylvania in the same ceremony as Seamus Heaney, she asked the Nobel Laureate, 'Seamus, do you have a biographer?'; 'I don't believe I have Mary', he replied; 'Seamus, you really ought to get a life.' A life required clarity of purpose and growth, as Mary said in a different context: 'A well-crafted composition is its own authentication' (2007: 27). Craft is achieved over time by dint of effort and application, in which sense the craftsman's is the antithesis of the romantic life, a story told in terms of its defining moment of destiny. Between setting out as the promising acolyte and completing the life course as the established senior figure was the small matter of mid-career, marked by competitions for resources, authority and followers, and this was an area Mary handled with far less intuitive aptitude. But let's deal with the works of her retirement before returning to mid-career.

Why was Mary's retirement so productive? That her curiosity was undiminished, her desire to write unflagging, her self-discipline iron, and her faculties unimpaired can be taken as givens. Mary imagined her memory to be failing towards the end of her life but, like many of us getting older, she seems first to have forgotten that her memory for detail had always been uneven. Mary's uncanny gift was for recognising patterns, and relating broad resemblances to one another. Her use of this talent was aided by her method and her style, both of which were more flexible in

Arts and Sciences in 1974 would appear to be the significant exception to the generalisation that Mary's honours all post-dated her retirement from Northwestern University. The 2001 Marianist Award, Dayton Ohio, was particularly significant because of the autobiographical reflections in her 2002 acceptance speech, 'A feeling for hierarchy' (Douglas 2002).

practice than precept. Method had two main aspects: a loosely structuralist approach to understanding ideas holistically, tempered by a refusal to entertain structuralist imaginings that appeared to her ungrounded in the understanding of local terms and key symbols. Second, these 'thought styles', as she called them in her later work, became culturally embedded, and hence recurrent, but they always did so in terms of a form of social life. The same idea or symbol might mean different things within different forms of social life, and these different meanings were typically competitive. Collaboratively she refined the method of grid and group formulated during her mid-period into what she called 'Cultural Theory', consisting fundamentally of a quartered map of social types, each quadrant of which was occupied centrally by a paradigmatic type: two of these possessed strong group characteristics (hierarchy, and its egalitarian counterpart enclave) which the other two lacked (competitive individualism, and isolated individualism). The terms varied, but not the overall conception. To the four social environments would correspond four types of person entertaining four different sets of preconceptions about the nature of the world. Talking to one another, the representative social types would reinforce the self-evidence of their shared certainties, but trying to argue with other social types their different preconceptions meant they were likely to talk past one another. A simplification? Of course, that was the point of a schema sufficiently general to be able to apply to any case and allow any comparison. I met Aaron Wildavsky, Mary's collaborator on the cultures of risk, only once, but a comment he made stayed with me. It was to the effect that before working with Mary he was never sure what he thought about a particular subject. Since working within the paradigm of cultural theory he knew how to find his own perspective on any given problem. In short he credited Mary with developing his capacity to have his own ideas. I suspect most of her collaborators would say something similar, that cultural theory generated hypotheses.

The history and literature of religions

It was in 1987 that Mary first read the Book of Numbers in its entirety in preparation for delivering the Gifford Lectures in the Edinburgh Divinity School. Old Testament study was not as important an element of a Roman Catholic education as it might have been of an equally conventional Protestant upbringing of her time. But Mary's Oxford teachers and contemporaries had drawn on the Old Testament for examples, and they had

studied the biblical scholar William Robertson Smith, who drew upon ethnography of the Middle East to interpret biblical kinship and ritual, as an anthropological precursor. Mary followed their examples, and the dietary prescriptions of Leviticus XI provided her with the materials for the most famous, and most anthologised, chapter of *Purity and Danger* (1966). However, analysing an entire book of the Pentateuch in its full context, that is as a text put into its received form by particular redactors who had both narrow and wide reception in mind, was a new challenge requiring historical and linguistic skills that went well beyond a facility for lifting biblical examples as apt illustrations. Mary set about acquiring these skills and cultivating an increasingly wide circle of Bible scholars in both Jewish and Christian traditions who commented extensively on her work. *In the Wilderness* (1993) was the first in a trilogy of works that resulted. There, Mary detected an elegant structure in what many scholars disparaged as a ragbag of a book. Numbers on her analysis consisted of a ring made up of a dozen, or thirteen, sections which alternated passages of narrative, marked by action and plot, with passages of eternal law (linked to the names of Moses or Aaron). Arranging these episodes in a circle would place narrative and law passages in parallel (or in rungs as she called them): matching II/XII, IV/X, VI/VIII as law rungs, and I/VII, III/XI, V/IX as stories. Douglas discovered that the power of each paired passage was reinforced when read in relation to its complementary: thus II and XII deal with boundaries and exclusions; IV and IX both specify occasions when trumpets should be used; VI and VIII deal with sin, purification and sacrifice. Similarly, the narrative episodes can be read consecutively to chart passage from defeat to renewal. The discovery of structure clearly delighted her aesthetically, but it did not satisfy her anthropological sensibility. Who was likely to have created so complex a construct, and why? The answer depends crucially on the date of redaction. Mary imagined priestly authors belonging to the community that would build the second temple; their texts carried a socially inclusive vision, a conclusion that was to entail significant revision of Mary's early analysis of the community that had produced Leviticus. This was elaborated in the next volume.

Leviticus as Literature (1999a) picked up issues that had preoccupied Mary Douglas since her fieldwork among the Lele of the, then, Belgian Congo. *Purity and Danger* was neither the first nor most recent occasion she had used Leviticus XI to illustrate anomaly and abomination. Why was there abhorrence of anomaly, treated as abomination, among Jews, while Lele sanctified the transgressive pangolin? She suggested in 1972 that rigidity of classification and antagonism to categorical mixing were

typical of a people, like the Israelites, who saw themselves 'as a distinct species', not needing 'to mirror in nature their society seen as a series of regulated transactions with other humans' in the same way as the exogamous Lele (1972; 1975; 1999c: 279). Nature, ingestion and reproduction, she argued, are thereby subjected to consistent codings. *Leviticus as Literature* rejected most of this reading of the text. Taken in its entirety (without focus on a particular chapter as she had tended to do previously) Leviticus was formally more complex even than Numbers. The aim of its priestly authors and editors was to create a new and distinctive religion, freed of kings, ancestors, demons and evil spirits.

Leviticus, Mary Douglas argued in 1999, is structured, like concrete poetry or a picture poem, into three sections, which textually mirror the tripartite spatial dimensions of Mount Sinai, the desert tabernacle, and the temple. The divisions between the three sections of laws, corresponding to three areas of the tabernacle, are marked by two narrative interludes. The text leads the reader around the outer court of the tabernacle in its first seventeen chapters (including chapter 11 on animal classification), crossing a narrative episode about blasphemy, before entering the sanctuary which includes verses on the role of priests and the times of the feasts to be marked by burnt offerings; a second screen is passed in order to enter the holy of holies, the chamber of the ark, where the text centres on the proclamation of the covenant with the people of Israel which enjoins them to behave with justice. The famous passages on animal classification are recontextualised here as elements of a much broader 'cosmogram' which works through analogies between bodies, coverings, the tabernacle and Mount Sinai, and which is fundamentally concerned with proper sacrifice and atonement. Rather than being abominations, the anomalous animals of Leviticus, which chewed the cud but were not cloven-footed, or, like the pig, were cloven-footed but not cud-chewing, were the subjects of divine compassion, and hence they could not be eaten. The attitude of the creator depicted in the Pentateuch towards his creation was inclusive and nurturant.

These themes are teased out and restated in the concluding volume of the trilogy, still centred on the priestly books, but broadened to the Pentateuch as a whole. *Jacob's Tears: the Priestly Work of Reconciliation* (2004) consists largely of previously published essays on particular themes and, for that reason, may be the easiest way for a reader new to Douglas's Old Testament project to grasp her conclusions. Here we learn most explicitly of her conclusion that the priestly editors of the Pentateuch in their perhaps idealised description of a radically aniconic and monotheistic

religious practice were engaged upon a politics of inclusion of all the descendants of Jacob that was at odds with the separatism growing within Judah. The priestly editors emerge as the heroes of the trilogy: idealistic, beneficent, and possessed of great artistry in forms that went unrecognised by centuries of readers. And it is this last observation that left room for a postscript to the extended labours concluded on the priestly books.

Thinking in Circles: an Essay on Ring Composition (2007) was the final book to appear in Mary's lifetime. She had been diagnosed with cancer in 2006 but decided against telling her children immediately, as Philip recounted to me after her death, because the fuss they were bound to make would interfere with her completing the book which derived from her F. D. Maurice Lectures at King's College London and Dwight Harrington Terry Foundation Lectures on Religion in the Light of Science and Philosophy. The lectures had been concerned with the general issue of genre as a set of expectations which frame our understandings of textual content. They are also a valedictory statement on the importance of 'pattern perception', the way our anticipations about structure bias our understanding. The chapters explain ring composition and provide examples not only from Mary's biblical studies, to which she adds some of Genesis, but from sources as varied as classic detective fiction to the *Iliad* and Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*. In conclusion, she wonders at the historic loss of the ability to recognise complex constructions, not just lately but also in the past. Postmodernism, she suggests, is simply the latest case of mistrust in truth, language, closure and poetic structures. As an attack on anti-formalism, it is an argument, as we shall see in a moment, with echoes of 'the contempt of ritual' to it.

Mary took delivery of *Thinking in Circles* with undiluted enthusiasm and delight, giving copies to her many friends. Then, not quite done yet, she settled back to the filial duty of editing her father's fishing essays for publication. These appeared after her death, with extensive and witty editorial notes, as *Being Fair to Trout* (2008).

Cultural theory

Biblical studies may have been the predominant topic of Mary's individual writing after retirement, but they did not preoccupy her to the exclusion of all else, and were even encompassed by her theoretical concerns. In collaboration with a widening group of collaborators and co-authors she continued to develop 'Cultural Theory', the successor to 'grid and group'

which had evolved since she moved to the Russell Sage Foundation.⁵ The appointment encouraged her resolution to apply the anthropological theories she had developed to understand such topics as cognition and ritual to the problems of contemporary western societies. During the 1970s she had begun work on British food habits with Michael Nicod (1974). A wider collaboration with Baron Isherwood looked to revise the foundations of consumption theories in economics. *The World of Goods*, mostly researched and written in London, and widely advertised to appear in 1978, was delayed in press and came out in 1979,⁶ by which time she had moved to the Russell Sage, where she produced a further edited volume on food festivals, but also embarked on the research on environmental movements with Aaron Wildavsky that would be published as *Risk and Culture* (1982). For all the evident affection in their friendship, Mary's papers reveal it was not always an easy collaboration, and she did not share Aaron's optimism about the quality of the first complete draft of their work, sending around forty copies of the typescript to potential readers for comment. The archive also confirms, what is apparent to any reader, that the authors took lead responsibility for different chapters, and the difference in their styles posed problems for the book as whole. Mary worried that Aaron was insufficiently attentive to details, as she wrote to Mike Thompson: 'Environmental groups are to Aaron what red rags are to a bull and he does not pause to sort them out before putting his head down and charging' (NUA, Douglas, Box 7, letter of 17 October 1980, page 3). Because Aaron lost his position at the Russell Sage Foundation early in the project, their collaboration often took place at distance. Nonetheless, the book made a considerable splash as many reviewers conceded the main argument, that social preconditions must play some part in explaining why people worry differentially about what are objectively similar levels of risk, without conceding the specific correlation Douglas and Wildavsky proposed, that the social type they called sect or enclave was obliged to call upon issues of pollution and purity to patrol its borders because it lacked the internal means of organisation to do so otherwise.

Refinement and restatement of 'cultural theory' was the leitmotif of all Mary's later works. Most extensive were two booklength statements. The first, *How Institutions Think* (1986), based on the 1985 Frank W. Abrams

⁵Mary combined appointment at Russell Sage with a series of Visiting Professorships at New York University (1978–9), Columbia (1979–80), and Yale (1980–1).

⁶Hence the bibliographic error in my *Mary Douglas: an Intellectual Biography*. There is substantial documentation of the delays in the Northwestern University Archives (Douglas, Box 7).

lectures delivered at Syracuse University, belonged to the period of her work also preoccupied with risk. Its recurrent preoccupation is in some ways the obverse of *Risk and Culture*. Whereas that book had looked for the social origins of oppositional ideas, *How Institutions Think* sought the organisational grounds for shared standards of justice and entitlement, and for the common capacity to produce and share in public goods. *Missing Persons* (1998, with Steven Ney) can be read as its companion volume: the earlier book highlighted the frequently invisible powers of institutions, while the second emphasised the cross-institutional variability of the person. Together, the books were a powerful restatement of Mary's consistent critique of individualism and utilitarianism in social theory.

A majority of Mary's last essays on risk analysis and environmentalism were authored collaboratively with long-time research associates (to be collected in Douglas forthcoming *b*). One of these collaborators was Gerry Mars, with whom she applied cultural theory to contemporary problems of terrorism. This was the subject of her last interview with Christopher Howse,

'It's no good attacking enclaves,' Mary Douglas said, dissecting a piece of guinea fowl on her plate. 'It just makes them more firmly enclaves.'

'If a sectarian enclave is never allowed to publish its dissident views, it will make itself heard by violent attacks on its enemies,' she says. 'If these people hate America anyway, and America attacks them, it increases the hostility of the enclave.' (Interview with Christopher Howse, *Spectator*, 25 April 2007)

Lunch and conversation over, Howse describes leaving Mary surrounded by her filing cabinets of papers, at work editing her father's fishing essays.

Starting out

Mary Douglas was born Margaret Mary Tew in San Remo, Italy, on 25 March 1921, the first of the two daughters of Phyllis Margaret Twomey (1900–33) and Gilbert Charles Tew (1884–1951). Her sister, Patricia, was born two years later. Mary's parents married in Burma the previous year and were taking a delayed honeymoon, together with his wife's mother (as her father apparently never forgot), on the Italian Riviera *en route* for extended home leave from their colonial posting to which Gilbert was entitled every three years.

Phyllis's father was Sir Daniel Harold Ryan Twomey (1864–1935), son of a Queenstown butcher and ship's chandler, who enjoyed a distinguished

career in the Indian Civil Service which he joined on the back of education by the Jesuits at St Stanislaus College in Leinster, and then at University College London. Arriving in Burma aged twenty, he was a barrister by 1895, a judge by 1909, and chief judge of the court of Lower Burma by 1917, the year he was knighted (information from *India List and Indian Office List* 1906 and subsequent years). He retired in 1920, the year his daughter married, when he and his wife May took up residence in Totnes, Devon.

On paper, Gilbert Tew's career in the Indian Civil Service looks less glittering than his father-in-law's. The son of a gasworks manager, he was educated at Warwick School, where he earned a scholarship to read Classics at Emmanuel College, Cambridge. According to the story he told Mary (2008: 14) he opted for the Indian Civil Service in the hope of fishing for the fabled 'mahseer', only to find on arriving in Burma in 1908 that the fishing was poor. Starting out as an assistant commissioner, he was private secretary to the Lieutenant Governor for a year before his marriage and confirmed as a deputy commissioner in 1924, taking on a variety of roles redolent of their period as 'custodian of enemy property', and as an excise commissioner with responsibilities for the government monopolies of opium and salt (information from *India List and Indian Office List* 1920s and 1930s).

Once she came of school age (in 1926), Mary and her younger sister were sent to live with their mother's parents in their Totnes bungalow. As she wrote "sending home the children" was a normal part of British colonial family life' (2002: 10). Mary's maternal grandmother, May Ponsford, the daughter of a Protestant army chaplain, had run away from home to become a nurse at Guy's Hospital. Although she remained staunchly Protestant, she fulfilled her promise to bring up her own daughter Phyllis in the Catholic faith. In a late interview with Alan Macfarlane, Mary recollects a similar promise concerning herself made by her grandmother to her mother. Perhaps the story applies in both instances; but whether it does or not, the idea of adhering to a promise once made clearly mattered deeply to Mary. She and Pat attended Stoodley Knowle, a French convent primary school in Ilsham, Torquay, where they boarded during the week, returning to stay with their grandparents for weekends and holidays. Mary later described the impact on her of this hierarchical and positional family and home, which had a place and time for everyone and everything. Perhaps it lacked something in warmth and spontaneity: '... it is true that not many people dropped in there at odd times for a meal. But it had other merits, stability, predictability, and readiness to adopt grandchildren'

(1997: 19). The girls were visited annually by their mother, and every three years by their father.

This routine changed when Mary and Pat's mother became ill and returned home with their father in 1932, where she died in 1933. Mary and Pat were entrusted to the Mothers of the Sacred Heart Convent by their own mother once she realised her cancer was terminal. Pat recalls a senior nun taking them into the garden to be told their mother had died as 'we walked down an avenue of Acacia trees all in bloom'. Gilbert Tew officially retired from the Indian Civil Service in 1934 (*India List*, 1935) and took his children into his care: 'We left our grandparents to go to live with him, a kindly stranger who had never had much to do with children' (2002: 12). To which she added, 'My father was invincibly agnostic, but he made it his pious duty to drive us to Mass and the three of us put flowers on my mother's grave every Sunday without fail' (2002: 13).

The Sacred Heart Convent in Roehampton then still lay beyond London's southern outskirts. It was where her mother (and mother's cousins) had also been sent for education while their parents served overseas. This strong sense of a tradition of Roman Catholic education picked upon a particular family line, that of Mary's mother and mother's father, which for most of her life seems to have prevailed in Mary's own sense of descent and person, including her Irish ancestry. Later she picked out two other legacies of her education: the hierarchical template for organisation, based upon the rituals, injunctions and sanctions of the school, which impressed itself on her mind,⁷ and the social teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, which were studied in some detail and left her fascinated by the formulation of social problems and their resolution. She particularly recalled study at school of Pius XI's encyclical of 1931 *Quadregesimo anno*, the fortieth year being the time to have elapsed since Leo XIII's *Rerum novarum* (reacting to the new state of social matters in the late nineteenth century). These documents emphasised themes of justice and charity in the alleviation of necessary inequalities, and were forceful in their rejection of the excesses of laissez-faire capitalism. Subsidiarity, the devolution of responsibility as far as commensurate with authority, was presented as a guiding principle of hierarchy.

⁷Conversations with Mary persuaded me to emphasise this preference for hierarchical organisation, under rather specialised definition, that stayed with Mary throughout her life. Her Marianist Award Lecture kindly noted that her biographer 'drew together these scattered threads and convinced me there was a central theme' (2002: 36) without noting that it was Mary herself who had scattered the threads for her biographer to draw upon.

Mary was so enthused by these concerns that she recalled wanting to study sociology at the London School of Economics. But the Sisters thought this too radical a step. Instead six months were spent in Paris at the Sorbonne, and then some months at a crammer in the Cotswolds in order to pass the Oxford entrance examination. She elected to read 'Modern Greats' (Politics, Philosophy and Economics), then still a relatively recent programme of study considered particularly appropriate for addressing contemporary problems from a variety of perspectives, and preparing graduates for a civil service career. The Sacred Heart had opened a 'small house' in Oxford in 1929 allowing some of the nuns, as well as the girls who lived with them, to study at Oxford, and this house acted as an official hostel of the Society of Home-Students at St Anne's. Mary graduated with a BA in 1943 (MA 1947).

During her first degree, the outbreak of hostilities saw Mary engaged in war service. Her daughter Janet remembers Mary saying that her father was keen on her undertaking war service, though he did none himself, and she spent some time making munitions. This might have been at St Anne's, since the Principal of the Society of Home-Students, Eleanor Plumer, was an advocate and organiser of war work, even on the premises.

On graduation, Mary worked for four years (1943-7) as a Temporary Assistant Principal in the Colonial Office which transpired to be a backwater in the war effort, for all it had seemed to her appropriate in terms of her family's colonial background. However, it was here that she began to meet anthropologists, including Audrey Richards and Raymond Firth. Her curiosity piqued about anthropology, she resolved to read the subject after the war.

In 1942 the Society of Home-Students had become the St Anne's Society, and this was Mary's affiliation when she began studying first for a diploma and then for her B.Sc. in Anthropology in 1947, submitting in May 1948 a thesis on 'Bride wealth in Africa'. The abstract describes this as 'A comparative study of bride wealth in Africa, with special reference to kinship structure and tribal organisation. It is proposed to compare the functions of bride wealth in selected societies from different parts of Africa, with a view to discovering its role in stabilising marriage.' Mary had undertaken a rather clunky comparison of more than twenty African societies correlating divorce, filiation of children, and the solidarity of descent groups with the type of descent system. The conclusions were not dramatic: she found, as might be anticipated, that biological paternity was of more importance in matrilineal than patrilineal societies, and that lineage development tended to correlate with recognition of sociological

paternity and the payment of bride wealth, which comes down to much the same thing, since the payment establishes paternity (1948: 281). Otherwise the conclusion was largely negative; 'So far as bride wealth is concerned, it is only possible to say that, as it is essentially a contractual incident of marriage, it is less significant for the stability of marriage than the general attitude of the society to kinship and to all contractual obligations' (1948: 286). The thesis was very much of its time but did have two enduring consequences: it gave Mary an apprenticeship in kinship analysis and controlled comparison within Africa, and it convinced her that the more interesting problems in these regards involved matrilineal rather than patrilineal societies, a decision crucial to her deciding to undertake fieldwork among the matrilineal Lele of the then Belgian Congo.

At the start of this period she considered the idea of marriage to the Australian anthropologist W. E. H. (Bill) Stanner, whom she had met at a party for Phyllis Kaberry hosted by Audrey Richards, in a flat Mary recalled being somewhere near Oxford Circus in London, when Phyllis was about to leave for Cameroon (if for her first trip there this would probably have been in 1944, when Stanner was in London at the War Office and Mary at the Colonial Office). The relationship continued until about 1949, although Mary commented later that Stanner had not supported her ambition to become an anthropologist, and that their marriage would have been unfortunate.⁸

The years 1948–9 found Mary under Daryll Forde's wing as a Research Assistant at the International African Institute, working on the volume of the Ethnographic Survey of Africa that covered Nyasaland (as it then was, now Malawi). Again the experience of working to synthesise African materials immediately relevant to her field area was more important than the product which fitted into a generic series. In addition, the job provided some of the funds towards fieldwork. Publication of the Nyasaland volume elicited a pair of letters from Hastings Banda in January 1951, which Mary thought sufficiently important to save and archive at Northwestern. The first of them began:

You must forgive me for writing this letter. I am a person unknown to you. But if I mention the fact that I am a Chewa from Kasungu, my writing will become readily understandable (Northwestern University Archives, Box 1)

⁸I am grateful to Melinda Hinkson of the Australian National University who asked me to request Mary's recollection in connection with her biographical project on Stanner.

Whether anything came of the letters I don't know, but the second did not seem to encourage any development of their relationship as its author confessed himself very occupied.

An initial round of fieldwork in the Belgian Congo lasted from May 1949 to April 1950, a brief sojourn by the standards of anthropology of the day. Mary's fieldwork was considerably eased by the offer of accommodation on her arrival, and before moving into Lele villages, with the missionary order of the Pères Oblats de Marie Immaculée at Basongo, from where she was able to get a lift by lorry belonging to the local oil palm company.

Without intensive study by someone able to read the transcription of Lele, the archived fieldnotes at Northwestern University add little to what can be deduced from the published articles and books (Fardon 1999, chapter 3). Mary's field notebooks seem to have been broken up to be reorganised in thematic files that also contain reading notes and what appear to be the outlines of lectures delivered in Oxford on such subjects as, 'Village feuds: relation of clan to village' and 'Internal village organization', or 'Aspects of Lele religion'. She recounted in a 2006 recorded interview with Alan Macfarlane how she moved away from the influence of the mission, eventually settling in her cook's village.⁹

There was considerable press interest in Mary's return from fieldwork and her impending marriage to James Douglas, but it was largely frivolous: reported as 'Love—among the savages!' (by the *Sunday Pictorial*, 11 Feb. 1951), or 'Tarzan girl is to wed' (*Sunday Graphic*, 4 Feb. 1951), 'Year in "village of shared wives"'. Lone girl's amazing exploit' (according to *Reveille for the Weekend*, 30 June–2 July 1950). To the extent that it was noticed, coverage of this kind might not have gone down well in professional circles.¹⁰

Mary's father by this time was suffering from osteoporosis. He was able to attend her wedding in a wheelchair in March 1951, but she was given away by her uncle, Brigadier Twomey. Her marriage brought an end to a year spent teaching at Oxford, when she drew largely upon her own Lele ethnography as was the custom then. She also attended Franz Steiner's lectures on 'Taboo', which were to make an enduring impression (Steiner 1956; Adler and Fardon 1999). Moving to London, with a new job at UCL, and the birth of Janet late in 1951, she and Jim initially lived in his South Kensington flat. Jim moved from the civil service, at the Board of

⁹ Available at <<http://www.alanmacfarlane.com/ancestors/douglas.htm>>.

¹⁰ Thanks to Phil Douglas for finding these in his mother's study and copying them for me.

Trade, to a position in the Conservative Research Department that same year. By 1953 Mary was ready to embark on a second stint of fieldwork. A new maturity is evident in this project, the purposes of which were more clearly delineated. Fieldnotes for the trip survive intact in the Northwestern University Archive in the form of two notebooks, each numbered from front to back, and then written from both back and front:

Volume 1: from front 'Hunting' (1–80 pp.); from back 'Diary' (158–106 pp.)

Volume 2: from front 'Sorcery and Pollution' (1–74 pp.); from back 'Kinship and Village' (158–100 pp.)

A dense passage from the front section of Volume 2 gains particular interest in the light of her later writings, since it is the first statement of ideas, for instance about purity and defilement, or the close kinship of jokes and insults, or transgression and solidarity, with which she was to be identified more closely than any others.

Asked to define dirt in England—Not earth, just simply [dirt]. Contrast: idea of dirt, with 'good clean mud' etc. Chesterfield 'Dirt is any matter displaced' e.g. hair, crowning glory etc. and hair in the soup. But child putting spoon it has licked back in the veg. tureen and told off for being 'dirty'. 'Dirty' is much wider range than just 'dirt'. Any bodily excreta, saliva, vomit, faeces, and anything that has contact with them is dirty. Food is wholesome when served, but as soon as someone has eaten a little, and left it, it is 'orts', remains, dirty. Toothbrush avoidance. Drinking out of same cup, mark of solidarity. Sharing of 'dirty' experience symbolizes common status, hence importance of the dirty joke in breaking ice, and the wrongness of it in 'company', i.e. where superior status is publicly recognized. The sluttishness of leaving brooms about in public at home. Lele also hide brooms away. Razor associations. Privacy of toilet. Dirty jokes. Sex, lavatory, and spittle (e.g. 'My beer, I have spat in it.' Curate and the Irishwoman's cup of tea.) Insults take the same form—good one combines all three. (1953 Fieldnotes, volume 2, page 29)

To begin with the two jokes cited at the end of the passage: the first I heard from my father, who is of Mary's vintage, long ago with an unpopular sergeant-major as its protagonist. Philip, Mary's younger son, sent me his recollection of his mother's version:

A man walks into a pub in a rough part of town. He finds himself out of place and consequently feels threatened. Silence falls when he enters, eyes follow his every move, the bartender is sullen and short changes him, and so on. So, when he goes to the loo he leaves the note on his glass, 'Do not drink out of this, I have spat in it.' On his return he finds a dozen scrawled signatures under the statement.

Aside from the role of spittle that struck Mary, Philip noted that his mother's version picked up two themes he thought of particular interest to her, the idea of the stranger out of place in unfamiliar surroundings, and the reflection of this dissonance in the change of written registers, a written command and a series of scrawled signatures. The second joke was unfamiliar to me, but Philip came to my help:

A new curate in the small, poor, rural district of Killywhatever is visiting the poor and the sick of his parish. He has come from a different background from his parishioners, he lived in a nice house and went to university, so this is all a bit new for him, having to meet the needy face to face. He is uncomfortable and out of place. In the home of a particularly sick and needy woman he is offered the minimum courtesy of a cup of water, all that the poor woman has in the house to offer anyone. She holds before him a broken teacup, clearly not clean, filled from a bucket under the sink. He feels that refusing this meagre gift could only be taken as an insult, something not consistent with his professed role there. He takes the cup, and drinks from it. He has the presence of mind, however, to work out that if he holds that cracked and dirty cup by the handle, he will almost certainly put his mouth to the same portion of its lip that the woman habitually does, unless he pretends to be left handed. In grasping the cup by the handle with his left hand he ensures that he will put his mouth to the opposite side. 'Oh!' she says, on seeing this, 'and it's left handed that you are too, Father! We have so much in common!'

The come-uppance, proximity to spittle belonging to a social circle different from the drinker's, is similar in both cases: the stranger in the pub is prevented from drinking, while the out-of-place curate rather wishes he hadn't.

Janet Farnsworth, Mary's daughter, relates that her mother used to explain her sensitivity to the variable classification of dirt in terms of her and Jim's differing thresholds of tolerance for particular types of disorder (an explanation Mary also gives in *Purity and Danger*). Jim was apparently appalled by infant urine being disposed of down the kitchen sink, while both Mary and Janet learnt from the nuns of the Sacred Heart that there were places where things like hairbrushes belonged, and they certainly should not be found anywhere else. In her 2006 interview with Alan Macfarlane, Mary makes a very similar sort of observation about living with her sister Pat, as she had after Jim died: that Pat found her kitchen practices unhygienic, while she found Pat to be untidy, to which Mary added that although she believed in germs, she did not believe there was much one could do about them. Noticing these domestic concerns is one thing, elevating them to the building blocks of theoretical schemes about

classification is another. Her acuity owed much to Franz Steiner's lectures, the influence of which is clear not just in her writings but also in the several sets of notes she took on their published version; the capacity to draw anthropological lessons from everyday life is Mary's (forthcoming *a*). Analogising personal relations (including those with family members), contemporary institutions both in the UK and USA, and global cultures comparatively provided texture to Mary's thought. Thus, 'hierarchy' is picked up as characteristic of her grandmother's home, of her convent boarding school, the Indian caste system, the Lele's Bushong neighbours relative to themselves, and the social environment she preferred for herself.

The oppositional side to her interest in the boundaries of classificatory systems can be found in Mary's strong aversion to what she called medical materialism, the idea that later scientific properties might be foreseen in earlier classifications and taboos (such as an avoidance of eating pork in hot climates being explicable in terms of later understanding of the dangers of being poisoned). On her return from the Belgian Congo she made strenuous efforts to discover the active properties of Lele medicines with little success (a line of enquiry she pursued alongside attempts to identify animal and botanical specimens specified by the Lele with their scientific counterparts). Take this letter from an obliging Medical Officer of Health in the London Borough of Hammersmith subject to her enquiry:

You emphasise that they regard putrifying animal matter as dirt par excellence, so that it is clear that corpses would not be handled except in a minimal way. Putrifying odours from corpses, whilst very unpleasant to the nose, and the corpse to the eye, are quite harmless from the point of view of disease.

On the other habit the practice of encouraging dogs to assist in the disposal of pus and excreta strikes me as being very risky if the dogs are later permitted to use the communal dwelling and "hob-nob" with the family. The prejudice also of avoiding walking in the footprints of sufferers from venereal disease or leprosy is not supported by scientific evidence. It would, in fact, be quite harmless to walk frequently in either, and no disease could result.

F. M. Day, Medical Officer of Health, Town Hall, Hammersmith, 16 December 1953 (Northwestern University Archives, Douglas, Box 1)

To this might be added the evidence of a letter of 13 January 1954 from the School of Pharmacology at UCL concerning *Parinari Latifolium Exell*—'three aqueous extracts of leaf were prepared [...] Doses of up to 2ml. were added to a bath of Ringer containing an isolated rats' [*sic*] uterus. No detectable oxytopic principle was detected' (Probably signed by G. Y. Somers).

There were both positive and negative grounds to believe that classification was a cognitive phenomenon relating to social concerns, and evidence as diverse as jokes and insults, on the one hand, and scientific experiment, on the other, pointed the same way. However, getting from these insights to *Purity and Danger* was to take another decade. Her duties at UCL, allied to birth of three children, restricted the time Mary could spend on her scholarly work, as Max Gluckman was to remind her in 1956 when commenting on a draft essay.

Briefly, I have enjoyed reading the paper, especially the section on raffia and the last 6 pages. But frankly the mss. reads like the product of the mother of three small children—who has written down her good ideas in odds and ends of time, never had the chance to undertake a continuous stretch of writing and thinking on the problem, not had time to ‘scissors and paste’, or to index the order of points and rewrite. You have my sympathy!

(Northwestern University Archive, Douglas, Box 1)

There followed ten pages of detailed notes on single-spaced typed foolscap with additional handwritten amendments, which should have balanced the opening with ample evidence of good will. But relations between Mary and Max Gluckman, and particularly his wife, also Mary, were never warm. Mary’s work on Lele culminated in 1963 with publication of her monograph *The Lele of Kasai*, work she felt never enjoyed the attention that it deserved, particularly from the Manchester circle to whom she had addressed it, including case studies and surveys she thought would be congenial to them. As she surmised, this neglect was probably a consequence of most anthropological research in Africa following the colonial flag and imperial language, so her working in a Belgian colony, about which she then wrote in English, lost her a large part of two potential readerships.

The mid-life turn

As if all the ideas on which she had been working were finally liberated, the publication of her ethnographic monograph led to an extraordinarily creative period in Mary’s scholarship that included writing both of her most famous books: *Purity and Danger* (1966) and *Natural Symbols* (1970). The seeds of this work were apparent as early as 1953, in the passage of reflection from her fieldwork notes, and the famous analysis of Leviticus XI enjoyed several outings before becoming a centre piece of

Purity and Danger. The UCL programme for the 1959 series of Lunch Hour Lectures (autumn term, 19 November) advertised 'The abominations of Leviticus XI (an anthropologist's interpretation)' (Northwestern University Archives, Douglas, Box 5). The seven-page synopsis, evidently a version of the chapter on the same subject in *Purity and Danger*, and including the hallmark quotation from Lord Chesterfield about dirt being 'matter out of place', was filed with notes taken from Franz Steiner's *Taboo* (1956). The relationship was made apparent in 1964 with publication of an article entitled 'Taboo', Douglas's second contribution to a new semi-popular magazine, *New Society*. Writing for wider audiences, as she would later for *The Listener*, the published counterpart of the BBC's broadcasts, allowed Mary Douglas to cultivate a style appealing to the educated general reader, and to realise, as she put it later, the importance of joining 'a dialogue that is already ongoing': 'I think the difference between a book that gets acclaim and an equally good one that does not is confidence about the readership' (Letter to Kenelm Burridge, 8 May 1981, Northwestern University Archives, Douglas, Box 7).

How right was her own judgement about audience in the case of *Purity and Danger*? The book did not make an immediate splash with anthropologist reviewers who found it neither controversial nor particularly original. Oxford reviewers identified continuities with the French sources of Oxford anthropology, as well as the debt to Franz Steiner, but were cordial rather than enthusiastic about the outcome. However, *Purity and Danger* had a style comprehensible to the non-specialist reader willing to invest a little effort and, whether or not planned as such, was written in a problem-solving genre different from most anthropological books of its time which tended to fall into ethnographic monographs, or theoretical texts, or introductory accounts. For all Mary's misgivings about Claude Lévi-Strauss's *La pensée sauvage* (1962) it is to that book, or the same author's *Le totemisme aujourd'hui* (1962) or even Lucien Lévy-Bruhl's *La mentalité primitive* (1922) that one needs to look for genre models. *Purity and Danger* became an acknowledged classic only when discovered by non-anthropologists who relished Mary Douglas's demonstration that primitives and moderns alike become subjects of experience through schematic orderings that apply similarly to secular and to religious matters. The things of experience must be distinguished and set apart from one another, given their proper places. Rules and rituals are there to assure that separation is maintained. Yet classifications nonetheless throw up anomalies. The living creatures that violate classificatory boundaries are the subject of the most significant rituals of all: when they voluntarily give

up their lives, great forces for good are released. Thus, the pangolin is seen as a willing victim by the Lele, as is the master of the fishing spear amongst Dinka who was buried alive in old age, and this category includes, so Mary's use of familiar Roman Catholic imagery suggests, the sacrificed incarnate god of Christian theology.

This is broadly the argument of the first half of *Purity and Danger* and of its conclusion. The second half of the book has attracted less attention for good reason. While *Purity and Danger* seems to be intended as a general defence of religion, its argument goes on to distinguish primitive religions from the great religious traditions that had been cut loose over the centuries from their intermeshing with everyday life. Moreover, because they belonged to more differentiated societies, greater reflexivity had become possible in relation to them. The breakthrough of *Natural Symbols* (1970), as Douglas always portrayed it, was to abandon this progressive argument and replace it by adapting from the sociolinguist Basil Bernstein a schema which correlated the boundedness of social groupings with the scope and coherence of their symbolic systems. The immediate spur to revision had been the challenge to Roman Catholic liturgy posed by Vatican II, a challenge Mary, with her gift for spotting the exemplary case, had encapsulated in the impact that ending abstention from meat on Fridays had on London's 'Bog Irish' Catholics. Undo but one knot, she suggested, and coherent symbolic fabric can unravel in the manner of a handknitted jumper. Her theme was announced as 'The contempt of ritual', a title that must have had considerable resonance for her, since she reused it (1966*b*; 1968). This time reviewers could be under no uncertainty about her intention to launch a defence of ritual, hierarchy and deference. Anthropological reviews were particularly unfavourable, none more so than Edmund Leach, who claimed *Natural Symbols* to 'adapt [Mary Douglas's] learning to the service of Roman Catholic propaganda' (1971).

Despite this career-defining book, it was not a good period in Mary's professional life. Daryll Forde had retired from the UCL chair in 1970 and M. G. Smith appointed his successor. Mary was assuaged with a personal chair. She had applied unsuccessfully for professorships in Chicago and LSE. As the decade wore on, UCL's anthropology department became increasingly factionalised: Mary found herself, in terms of her own schema, trying to maintain authority in a small enclave rather than an inclusive hierarchy. She embarked on the invitation to write the Fontana Modern Masters volume on E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1980) whom she saw as her mentor. But even this work, published after she had moved to the USA, served to distance her from other survivors of E-P's Oxford

Institute.¹¹ Things went no better with Jim's career, he was Head of the Conservative Research Department by the time of Ted Heath's election failures in 1974, closely followed by Margaret Thatcher's election as Conservative leader in 1975 which saw Jim's one-nation conservatism fall out of step with the neo-liberal conservative orthodoxy. He took retirement in 1977. Mary's publications continued to be well reviewed by non-anthropologists, notably the sparkling collection of essays first published in 1975 as *Implicit Meanings* that has subsequently been revised and augmented. The essay remained the form, perhaps more than any other, to which Mary's gift for epigrammatic wit was best suited.

Mary felt her departure from Britain was largely unlamented, and her stay in New York began little better when the sacking of Aaron Wildavsky shortly after her arrival gave her insight into what she realised to be a very different style of management. By 1981, Mary had moved to Northwestern University and begun the last chapter of her life, which takes us back to where I started and to something of a conundrum. Because university departments of anthropology were never likely to function as hierarchies, Mary was institutionally best suited to being a respected elder in retirement; yet her most powerful ideas and her most influential writings were produced in precisely those antagonistic settings she wrote against.

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¹¹Though there cannot be any doubt that Mary's relationship with E-P was close to the end of his life. Among the papers at Northwestern University is an oddity: a postcard of pink roses, inscribed in pink felt pen, and postmarked 9 September 1973, Saxmundham, 'Many thanks for your letter. I have almost finished my memoirs. You have come out of them well', signed, 'E-P'. He died 11 September and his memoirs, probably a second instalment promised to *The New Diffusionist*, were never published and may not be extant (as confirmed by the editor to Mary Douglas: C. E. Joel, 9 May 1980, Northwestern University Archives, Douglas, Box 4).

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