

## Reviews

doi:10.1017/S0144686X14000920

Cathrine Degnen, *Ageing Selves and Everyday Life in the North of England: Years in the Making*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, UK, 2012, 172 pp., hbk £65.00, ISBN 13: 978 0 7190 8308 2.

The great strength of this book is the author's ethnographic research. Based on a lengthy period of fieldwork, it was well done and is well reported. The book is seventh in a series titled 'New Ethnographies' and, as an anthropological study of age and ageing, it is very welcome. As the author acknowledges, over the years, anthropologists – with a few honourable exceptions – have fought shy of engaging in the study of gerontological issues. The questions underlying the book are: what are the meanings of old age for older people and what are their consequences for the experience of later life. The author's fieldwork began in 1999 when she arrived 'aged 27, as an unmarried foreign student', to live in Dodworth, a former village, now suburb of the large town of Barnsley in South Yorkshire. This is a coal-mining area and employment in the industry had been dominant for much of the lives of the older generation, the last pit closing in 1988.

First the village is introduced in some detail (including photographs and maps), recounting key aspects of its history. Significantly, the author is at pains to de-romanticise the significance of coal mining and to challenge the stereotype of the household composed of breadwinning miner and domesticated wife. For the purposes of the project, she first targeted seven local community centres. Although she does not draw on a chronologically defined sample of older people, she reports in a footnote that her 'study population' was composed of 96 people, of whom 'in-depth, taped interviews' were carried out with 27 (p. 55). The oldest was born in 1908 and the youngest in 1930, the 'vast majority' being in their 'mid-seventies to mid-eighties' when interviewed. She herself is Canadian, and she describes well her initial problems in understanding the nuances of Dodworthian English.

Following two introductory chapters, the book is organised around a number of key concepts. In Chapter 3, she addresses questions related to time and memory talk and how 'the past' figures in the lives of older people. Chapter 4 examines the boundaries of old age as a social category, raising interesting questions about how 'real old age' is recognised. Chapter 5 turns to the impact of age on the sense of self and then, in Chapter 6, the author offers examples of how the narrative styles of older people construct 'oldness'. She draws upon the work of a number of anthropologists, in particular Sharon Kaufman, Barbara Myerhoff, Haim Hazan and Riitta-Liisa Heikkinen. She focuses on the more personal aspects of the experience

of age and, as a result, there is little reference to the impact of the complex political history of the mining industry. It may be that the author and her interviewees preferred to avoid this topic, recognising the tensions associated with strikes, political action and physical danger. But it is disappointing that the significance of shared histories is played down.

Although she does not plot individual change in the lives of her informants over the course of the six years she lived in Dodworth – hospital episodes, house moves, *etc.* – Degnen does report in her concluding chapter that several had died during this time. Most in-depth gerontological research extends over a relatively brief period and, as a consequence, the deaths of subjects tend to be seen, if at all, as exceptional. Few can claim, as the author does here, that ‘the cohort I knew so well during my fieldwork is now almost entirely gone’ (p. 139). This, her final chapter, is particularly impressive. Adopting a metaphor relating to the life cycle of a purple geranium may seem a dangerously sentimental strategy, but she manages to use it to good effect in reflecting on what she had learned from her time in Dodworth.

I have two reservations about the book. First, I am not convinced that it needs to begin with a summary account of age discrimination and demographic alarmism, nor that theories such as modernisation and disengagement were developed in order to ‘explain the denigrated position of older people’ (p. 2). It is only on page 3 that the author makes some valid points about the potential of anthropological research, declaring that her own study ‘set out to examine what old age “is”, what the markers of “old age” are and what the experience of the older self is like from the perspectives of the people living it’. I suspect that a more biographical introduction, drawing upon the book’s sub-title, ‘years in the making’ and Jon Hendricks’ argument that ageing is an incremental process, would have introduced the book more effectively. Better still might have been one of the powerful vignettes that she uses to illustrate her theoretical arguments. Her account of accompanying Olive to hospital, for example (pp. 121–3), would have been a powerful start to the book.

Secondly, there is the question of who the users of the community centres represent. Much of her fieldwork was undertaken within the confines of, and through links made in, these centres. The author had to gain permission from the centre organisers to attend their weekly meetings (p. 42), indicating that access was controlled. So the question arises: what part does age, specifically chronological age, play in regulating access? And if access is limited to local residents over a particular age (and to others such as researchers with a legitimate interest), does this not colour at the outset the conversations and interviews that the author had? Oldness (and conversely the author’s relative youth) is implicit in the relationships established by the research.

As a whole, however, the book is a splendid addition to literature on later life in contemporary Britain. There is much to be learnt from this in-depth and extensive ethnographic research: about how older people make sense of, and talk about, the situations in which they find themselves in later life.

Swansea, UK

BILL BYTHEWAY