

Chris Terrill

Doctor of Science

Durham Cathedral, 12 January 2018

Chris Terrill is one of those people who lives life to the fullest. He embodies that over used and clichéd phrase, *carpé diem*. If he has a personal motto, then it must be seize the day. Or perhaps, seize the adventure out of every moment of every day. He attended Brighton College in secondary school-- a place of privilege and prestige, though perhaps not necessarily comfort or luxury. He then came to Durham where he read for a joint honours degree in Geography and Anthropology. Between 1976 and 1977 he lived in southern Sudan with the Acholi tribe, a Luo Nilotic group of nomads who live in Uganda and South Sudan. His research focused on the impact of the refugee diaspora and experience on the tribal economy after repatriation. He had astutely identified different waves of refugee migration and different "flight" motives and responses during the refugee "career" that affected reactions to perceived opportunities before and after repatriation. The research was taken up by the United Nations and Norwegian Church Relief who were operating in the region. This kind of ethnographic analysis of the variation of refugee experiences and the subsequent impacts on society is, sadly, as relevant today as it was in the mid 1970s. He then took up the post of Head of Geography in another prestigious Independent School Rendcomb College in Gloucestershire. He could have lived his days out very comfortably with a career as an educator in the independent school sector, but Chris is not one to take the comfortable options in life. In 1983, he left teaching to become a full-time professional anthropologist working for the International Disaster Institute and the UN in Geneva. It was while working in war torn and famine ravaged parts of Africa that he seized the opportunity of a lifetime—he became a producer for the BBC World Service specialising in African affairs. Working his way through radio, he began making films and that is when things start to get really interesting. He merged his anthropological and film making skills to produce a slew of award winning, gripping documentaries. He won an Emmy for *outstanding investigative journalism* for a film called *Ape Trade*—a brutally honest expose of the illegal trade in orangutans to Taiwanese markets. After 20 years and 100 films with the BBC, Chris left the Corporation to set up an independent film

production company. Regardless of the production company, however, Chris has honed and refined his engaging hybrid film making art, drawing on his academic expertise in Geography and Anthropology. In particular, he is famous for employing participant observation and intimate interactions with his film subjects. His production company, Uppercut Films, started with Christine Hill, has as its sub-title: Documentaries that Celebrate, Not Denigrate. That may not encompass everything there is to anthropology, but it invokes an important starting point for the discipline. We don't denigrate the people with whom we work. I am humbled that Chris has implemented this anthropological moral position into the hard reality of commercial documentary film making and I only hope that I would be able to retain my convictions as nobly and consistently as he has done.

In 2007, Chris' documentary, *The 55 Year Old Commando* was released. This documented his ordeal to earn the coveted Green Beret of the Royal Marine Commandos. At 55 years old, he was, and will probably remain, the oldest person ever to successfully complete the Royal Marine Commando training. He did the training alongside the fittest young men in the Royal Marines and managed, somehow, to swing himself along the monkey bars with a dislocated finger. The film reveals much about Chris' drive and passion for his subjects and for pushing himself. It also clearly shows the respect he has for those who have come before him and sacrificed for something greater than themselves. He followed his Commando training up with a deployment to Afghanistan where he witnessed, first hand, the appalling truth of combat-- the brutal violence that destroys people and paradoxically creates a unique kind of bond between those who shared in the destruction.

Much of Chris' work has been either in war zones or in areas of extreme natural conditions. In addition to working alongside the Royal Marines in Afghanistan, he's lived the demanding life of a nomadic reindeer herder in Northern Norway. In the Sahara he has seen up close the devastation of severe drought and the rise in militant insurgencies. Chris has not shied away from the power of monsoon flooding in India. In West Africa, he has worked alongside fishing people and documented the resilience of the people and in the face of extreme poverty. And as I said earlier, he braved the wrath of criminal gangs in South East Asia to uncover the cruel and heartless trade in orangutans. And being an equal opportunity anthropologist, Chris

has turned his attention to the terrifying tornados, hurricanes and wild fires of the United States.

I began by suggesting that if Chris has a motto it must include something about seizing opportunities for adventure, but I should finish by saying that Chris is a man who cannot be reduced to the label of adventurer—he has shown compassion and empathy for others throughout his career and his films are a testament to the dignity and strength of his subjects.

Vice Chancellor I present Chris Terrill to receive the degree of Doctor of Science honoris causa.