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**W. H. R. Rivers is Our Forgotten Founding Father:
The True History of British Social Anthropology's Origins¹**

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Three centuries of anthropology

Why organize a conference to mark the centenary of the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to the Torres Strait in 1898 (CAETS)? The best reason and our main one is to explore the possibilities for a rapprochement between anthropology and psychology by looking at a period and some individuals who were then more open to collaboration between the disciplines than we are now. My task here is to examine the significance of the CAETS for the subsequent development of social anthropology in Britain. It is widely acknowledged that the expedition was a turning point in the history of the discipline. If Victorian anthropology was largely conducted from the armchair, this event, above all, marked a turn to fieldwork in Britain, but as a team effort, not the lone ranger in a pith helmet. Yet, if we ask what impact its participants have made on professional anthropologists and their students today, the answer is nil or negligible.

The conventional wisdom is that modern British social anthropology was born without significant antecedents in 1922, when the publication of monographs by Bronislaw Malinowski on the Trobriand Islanders and A. R. Radcliffe-Brown on the Andaman Islanders launched a “functionalist revolution”. The lineage of British social anthropologists has been based ever since on a bogus double descent myth,² tracing its foundation to these two ancestors, who might as well have sprung from the ground, for all that their epigones know or care. When I agreed to help organise this conference, a senior colleague told me “Well, I suppose there is some point in examining the history of an error”! In the light of this remark and of the prevailing attitude that it expresses, I should make my own motivation more explicit.

Anthropology, the aspiration to place knowledge of humanity as a whole on a rigorous footing, has been through three phases corresponding roughly to the last three centuries. In each case its object and method reflected the movement of world history when seen from a European perspective.

Anthropology grew out of the critique of the old regime of agrarian civilisation as part of an attempt to found democratic society on what human beings have in common. Locke, Rousseau and Kant wished to base the social contract on human nature and their method to that end was philosophical reasoning, supported by the best information available on the uncivilized peoples of North America and the South Seas. Indeed Immanuel Kant was the first to conceive of and publicize “anthropology” as an academic discipline,³ not that you will find references to that in courses on the history of anthropology.

The nineteenth century put the spirit of democratic revolution firmly behind itself and addressed a world brought into being by western imperialism, an expansion powered by machines. The question

Victorians asked was how they were able to conquer the planet with so little effective resistance. They concluded that their culture was superior, being based on reason rather than superstition, and that this superiority was grounded in nature as racial difference. Their perspective on world society was inevitably one of movement, so that the racial hierarchy they found out there was understood to be still evolving. The object of 19th century anthropology was thus to explain the origin of the continuing inequality between the races of mankind; its method was evolutionary history informed by wide-ranging comparison of examples linked by an assumption of human psychic unity. In other words, they could become like us once they submitted to an appropriate form of government and education by us.

In the twentieth century anthropology took the predominant form of ethnography. That is, individual peoples, studied in isolation from their wider context in time and space, were written up by lone ethnographers whose method was prolonged and intensive immersion in their societies. Nowhere was this project pursued more rigorously or exclusively than in the British social anthropology of Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown. By now, most professionals in social and cultural anthropology around the world pay at least lip service to this ethnographic ideal, although in other imperial centres (United States, France, Russia, India etc.) the methods used are more varied. And within Britain the basic model of functionalist ethnography has been undermined from numerous quarters for half a century now.

One of my aims in revisiting a formative event that took place in the twilight of the nineteenth century is to throw light on our own search for a new paradigm, by investigating in some detail how Victorian anthropology became its twentieth century successor, at least in Britain. In the course of this enquiry I also hope to illuminate the relationship between the dominant object and method of the twentieth century discipline and the history of world society of which it has been a part. The ultimate purpose of this, of course, is to clarify what form anthropology should take if it is to help us make an informed connection with world society in the next century.

Between evolution and ethnography

The intellectual history of British social anthropology was particularly well-served around the time of the CAETS conference, with books like Henrika Kuklick's *The Savage Within* and Jack Goody's *The Expansive Moment* (both of them conference participants). Until then, Adam Kuper's *Anthropologists and Anthropology: the British school 1922-1972* had the field virtually to itself. But the publication of a 600 page tome by George Stocking, the preeminent historian of anthropology, overshadowed these. *After Tylor: British Social Anthropology 1888-1951* is the sequel to *Victorian Anthropology* and its

theme is precisely that shift from armchair evolutionary comparison to fieldwork-based ethnography with which this talk is concerned. Stocking sets out to disarm his critics in a pre-emptive preface where he represents his own approach as “historicist” rather than “presentist”. That is, he claims to have no particular axe to grind as far as today’s disputes within academic anthropology are concerned, preferring rather to capture as nearly as possible what the participants in the story took to be the truth. In consequence, his judgements are implicit and tend to favour the conventional wisdom.

Stocking’s method is largely biographical, focusing on a few individuals who made a big difference. He takes E. B. Tylor as his point of departure for the Victorian evolutionary approach, with Sir James Frazer as an even later exponent of that tradition. Towards the end of the book, he lists the individuals who dominate the story of British social anthropology’s formation as follows: “from Tylor through Haddon, Seligman, Marrett and Rivers to Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown” (p. 437). Given that the beginning and end of the story are virtually axiomatic, the interest of the plot lies mainly in the middle. It is notable that of the intermediate quartet mentioned here only Robert Marett of Oxford was not a member of the Torres Strait expedition. But Stocking pays little attention to Haddon and Seligman who enter the story from time to time as institutional godfather figures, but never as pioneers of theory or method, when seen from the teleological perspective of what British social anthropology eventually became. Marett’s claims to have been influential are likewise pretty marginal. This leaves us with the enigmatic figure of William Halse Rivers Rivers.

Rivers joined the CAETS as an experimental psychologist and he has been celebrated recently as a military psychiatrist in the First World War through Pat Barker’s trilogy of novels.⁴ But he did more than anyone to set British social anthropology on its modern course. Stocking gives Rivers more space than anyone else after Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown (a major section devoted largely to him in each of three chapters). His tone is often grudgingly dismissive, but Rivers’ prominence in the narrative of the twentieth century’s early decades is unavoidable. Inevitably, the question of the CAETS’ historical significance becomes conflated with the need to assess Rivers’ relationship to the functionalist revolution that Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown and their followers claimed to have initiated, more or less out of nothing.

Rivers deserves to be seen as the forgotten founder of professional social anthropology in Britain, an equal to his counterparts in America and France, Franz Boas and Marcel Mauss, neither of whom was subject to a posthumous coup to replace him. I have no wish to denigrate Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown as they did Rivers. I exhausted that line of polemic in the pamphlet I wrote with Anna

Grimshaw.⁵ It is obvious enough to me, as it is to everyone, that Malinowski was a writer and fieldworker of genius, the dominant figure in British social anthropology between the wars; and that Radcliffe-Brown, especially after Malinowski left England shortly before the Second World War, was responsible, with the help of his close colleagues Edward Evans-Pritchard and Meyer Fortes (the gang of three), for the structural-functionalist paradigm that gave British social anthropology such a coherent, if rather narrow profile in mid-century.

The only reason for taking up the cudgels on Rivers' behalf is that his contribution has been all but eliminated from the collective memory of the discipline. To some extent this is because, by a cruel irony, he died unexpectedly in the same year, 1922, that the functionalist revolution is thought to have taken off, especially with the publication of *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, but also of *The Andaman Islanders*. 1922 also saw the publication of Joyce's *Ulysses*, Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, as well as Frederick Lugard's blueprint for indirect rule, *The Dual Mandate in Tropical Africa*. The hit movie of this annus mirabilis was Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* which, like *Argonauts*, revealed people formerly regarded as "primitive" in a heroic light. After the slaughter of the trenches, confidence in western civilization was shaken. The resilience of an Eskimo pitted against nature underscored the message that ways of life once dismissed as primitive had their own legitimacy and might even be a source of inspiration for a West on its knees. At least some intellectuals rejected the racist imperialism that engendered the war; and Malinowski rode that wave brilliantly.

The 1920s were witness to a revival of diffusionism (see below) which made "conjectural history" the main target of the new ethnographers and Rivers had nailed his flag to that mast for some time. As the dominant institutional figure before the war, his achievements had to be downgraded if his successors wished to represent themselves as revolutionaries. Both Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown were economical with the truth when it came to discussing their own antecedents and methods, whereas Rivers cultivated a self-effacing transparency to match his extraordinary versatility. The problem was particularly acute for Radcliffe-Brown as a product of the Cambridge school led by Haddon and Rivers.

Unlike Stocking, I have several explicit axes to grind; but my concerns are not strictly "presentist" since, as a participant in the long conversation about the human condition, I respect all predecessors who made a major difference to how we think. Something valuable is lost if we downgrade Rivers' contribution to that conversation. In what follows, I will show that he was central to the formation of the British school in the twentieth century, with the added twist that he was never wholly specialized in

anthropology. The way he reconciled anthropology and psychology went through some major shifts over time; and this makes his example instructive as we now face the uncertainties of a paradigm lost. First, however, I should mention the expedition itself and the part played in the subsequent development of British social anthropology by Alfred Haddon and Charles Seligman, who both played a central role in building up their departments at Cambridge University and the London School of Economics.

The CAETS' protagonists (minus Rivers)

The CAETS was Alfred Haddon's doing, a sequel to the natural history expedition he had undertaken a decade earlier to the islands between Australia and New Guinea occupying a narrow passage between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. His interest now was mainly in anthropology, seeing the Torres Strait islanders as a threatened culture, literally as islands in a sea of imperialist expansion. He expected to cover the sociology, folklore and material culture himself; but he also took along a linguist, Sidney Ray, a trainee student, Anthony Wilkin (who died young), and three experimental psychologists -- three because Rivers first nominated two of his students, Charles Myers and William McDougall, and then decided to come along too. A friend of Myers and McDougall, a medical pathologist called Charles Seligman, talked his way onto the expedition at the last minute. If you are hoping to find out more about the expedition, you will be largely disappointed. For the focus of the conference was principally on the consequences of the expedition. Six volumes of reports on the CAETS were published, the last (paradoxically the introduction) in 1935. A recent collection contains a number of essays on the expedition itself.⁶

As far as British social anthropology is concerned, the CAETS confirmed Haddon as the founder of a precocious school of anthropology at Cambridge which is widely held to have suffered a decline between the wars, only to be resurrected by Meyer Fortes in the 1950s. More important perhaps, the expedition launched Rivers and Seligman as anthropologists. The latter was the first lecturer in ethnology at LSE and Malinowski's teacher there. The two-part volume on physiology and psychology, for which Rivers was largely responsible, came out first. Our conference devoted a full session to Haddon and one and a half to Rivers. Seligman was unfortunately neglected, a fate that is mirrored by his treatment in most histories of the discipline, including Stocking's.

Haddon and Seligman were both prominent patrons of young ethnographers in the period before Malinowski got the fellowship programme of the International African Institute rolling in the 1930s. In addition to their institutional prominence at Cambridge, the LSE and the Royal Anthropological

Institute, Seligman, with his wife Brenda (also an anthropologist), was independently wealthy and thus a source of private financial support. Haddon and Seligman were always marginal to the functionalist revolution, but reasonably tolerant of it, giving vent occasionally to fogleish complaints, but recognizing a good thing when they saw it. They each retained a Darwinian evolutionary approach in which culture was still linked to biology. They both, especially Haddon (in collaboration with Huxley and Carr-Saunders), made a belated contribution to the anthropological critique of racism in the 1930s, despite remaining attached to racial taxonomy for most of their careers.⁷ Haddon was from the beginning concerned about the plight of natives in the colonies and Seligman too became involved in what was known between the wars as practical (later “applied”) anthropology.

Haddon was a populariser, author of general books on the evolution of art and on human history as the migration of peoples. He reviewed books for the *Daily Telegraph* in its heyday. Seligman became interested in psychoanalysis in the 1920s, a fact which has been noticed by the Frenchman, Bertrand Pulman,⁸ but not by many of his British colleagues. Stocking’s narrative gives some prominence to this moment of potential rapprochement between anthropology and psychology. Malinowski too played his part in an exchange that would have been made for Rivers, had he not died. Most important, Seligman led the movement of British social anthropology from the insular Pacific to Africa, carrying out with Brenda a survey of the Nile valley which acted as a bridge between a Frazerian interest in divine kingship and the subsequent study of African political systems by functionalist ethnographers. Indeed *African Political Systems* (1940), edited by Fortes and Evans-Pritchard, was dedicated to Seligman. More than any other single volume, this book announced the arrival of a new school, British social anthropology.

So Haddon and Seligman were more than just bit players in the story of British social anthropology; but of the CAETS protagonists no-one would deny that they were secondary to Rivers. Indeed it would be no exaggeration to state that the principal legacy of the CAETS was the (partial) conversion of Rivers to anthropology. In what follows, and contrary to Stocking’s method, I will pursue a teleological line, first sketching the distinctive features of British social anthropology in mid-century. I argue that functionalist ethnography was an allegorical commentary on a world divided into nation-states, its mythical double ancestry reflecting the contradictory dualism (*nation* and *state*) at the heart of twentieth century society. Then I will list Rivers’ main achievements, in order to place his contribution to the development of the discipline in perspective. Finally I shall claim that Rivers’ long struggle to combine the study of anthropology and psychology, a struggle that underwent some notable shifts, provides an ample source for reflection on how a future anthropology might succeed in bringing the

subjectivity of individuals and the history of human society as a whole into a creative methodological synthesis.

The CAETS and functionalist ethnography

In order to grasp what the functionalist revolution in modern anthropology was about, it is necessary to focus on the word *function* which refers principally to what people do. Exotic peoples had been studied before as evidence for what western societies may have been like before we began writing our own history. They were primitive in that sense. Their customs were taken out of context and arranged in taxonomic sequences illustrating various grand narratives of human progress which culminated in the achievements of the white race. The favourite themes were religion, marriage and technology.

The CAETS protagonists, as Henrika Kuklick⁹ has shown us, while remaining committed to Darwinian evolution as a broad framework for anthropology, wanted to place the island cultures in real history, both as present victims of western expansion and as the outcome of previous migrations whose character could only be inferred from the contemporary evidence. Haddon, Rivers and Seligman believed that the islanders' current way of life had some integrity, but it was under threat from a more powerful one and had already absorbed many previous cultural influences, situated as they were at a crossroads between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. They proposed therefore that the internal consistency of Pacific island cultures had to be set against their interaction with the rest of the world, in a process which might eventually be reconstructed as part of the story of human history in real time.

Rivers went on to compile *The History of Melanesian Society* in two volumes (1914) which sought to explain cultural variation within the region in part as the result of successive waves of migration. He eventually aligned himself with Grafton Elliot-Smith and William Perry whose revival of diffusionist world history featured Egypt as the source of a widely distributed cultural complex (an echo of the Lost Tribes of Israel discourse of the previous century). There is no doubt that Rivers and his colleagues generated some pretty wild stuff in reconstructing the human history as movement unconsciously imitating the British imperialism of the day ("navigators in search of precious metals" and so on). And this provided a convenient target for the functionalist ethnographers.

Malinowski published his functionalist manifesto in a series of short articles that came out between 1922 and 1926: the introduction to *Argonauts*, two papers in *Nature* and an encyclopaedia article. It boiled down to this. Culture is something people everywhere generate as a vehicle through which they carry out their everyday lives. It has to work for them on a daily basis and that includes the requirement

that the different parts add up to something reasonably coherent. It does not matter where the bits of culture come from; what matters is the integrity of the pattern expressed in the here and now. Malinowski persisted in calling his Pacific islanders “primitive”; but his message was that their way of life had an integrity that could offer some positive lessons to the West.

His functionalist method thus consisted of joining in the life of an exotic community to study intensively how the various aspects of everyday routine worked for the natives and added up to a coherent whole. He used his own (somewhat exaggerated) linguistic competence and long-term immersion in the field as a model. In contrast to the CAETS team quizzing informants in Pidgin English on a quick dash through several ports of call, Malinowski advocated prolonged fieldwork by single ethnographers willing to experience life as it was lived by others. He later developed a theory (*Scientific Theory of Culture*, published posthumously in 1944), that the function of an institution, the purpose of its existence, lay in its contribution to the biological survival of individuals within an interlocking matrix of such institutions.

Armed with this approach, Malinowski with Rockefeller funding supervised a programme of field research in the 1930s, mainly in Africa. This launched British social anthropology as a viable collective enterprise. But, if his style was romantic -- a lone ranger finding himself through encounters with the exotic other and writing vivid novel-like descriptions of faraway places -- the most pressing need of his followers was to establish a professional base for themselves within the home universities. And this is where the other half of the duo came in.

British social anthropology’s two sides and the nation-state

Radcliffe-Brown (no-one called him Arthur) must hold the record for geographical coverage of the world’s universities. Starting out as Rivers’ student in Cambridge, he spent more than two decades outside England, mainly in Australia, South Africa and the United States. Then, no sooner was he established in an Oxford chair and undisputed leader of British social anthropology in the 1940s, than retirement forced him to set off on his travels again -- to Brazil, Egypt, Manchester, South Africa and finally to an isolated death in London. Radcliffe-Brown brought British social anthropology firmly within Durkheimian sociology as the synchronic comparative study of primitive societies (not cultures). His functionalism stressed the concrete activities of living people observed in the field, but the purpose of these activities was their contribution to social order, conceived of as an integrated rule system or *social structure*. This approach gave rise to the hyphenated expression, structural-functionalism. He made kinship its core and, in elaborating what Malinowski sarcastically called

“kinship algebra”, he gave the neophyte profession a special expertise with which to mystify students and outsiders.

Radcliffe-Brown focused his effort on conceptual refinement and systematic taxonomy. If this comparative approach was reminiscent of Tylor’s evolutionism, he called his own method “a natural science of society” in which “primitive” peoples were not steps in a ladder of progress, but clarified through their greater simplicity the abstract principles underlying social order everywhere. He was aided in this task by his junior colleagues, Evans-Pritchard and Fortes who, by virtue of controlling the Oxbridge chairs during the academic boom of the 1950s to 70s, ensured that the British school remained identifiably structural-functionalist long after conditions in the wider world (the anti-colonial revolution) had undermined its basic assumptions.

The American sociologist-turned-anthropologist, George Peter Murdock, in 1951 launched a critique of the British school (cited by Stocking): he found their interests narrow, their theories parochial and their ethnographies too specialized; they neglected history and cultural change and were indifferent to psychology; they had lost touch with the wider international community of scientific anthropologists. Even so, when the intellectual history of the twentieth century is written, my guess is that a considerable place will be found in it for the monographs produced by the British school over four decades. Chief among them will be the books of Evans-Pritchard, Fortes and Raymond Firth; my own favourite is the former Viennese musician, Siegfried Nadel’s magisterial study of an indigenous North Nigerian state, *A Black Byzantium*.

The first half of the twentieth century was when peoples coerced into a world society made by European empires in the nineteenth century, sought to join it on their own terms. In doing so, they eventually found their own voices, largely those of historians, novelists, poets and political tracts; but if future generations want to know what they were like at the time, they may turn to the disciplined ethnographies of the dying British Empire.

British social anthropologists often wrote of African peoples as if they lived in bounded, timeless units isolated from the currents of modern history, on metaphorical islands to set against the real historical islands that Haddon and Rivers studied. This was paradoxical since many of the interwar ethnographers were funded through a Rockefeller grant to the International African Institute directed by Malinowski. This was called “Africa in social change” or how to replace the British Empire with its putative American successor. As a result they were heavily engaged with the problem that they preferred to call “the dynamics of culture contact”. So, without exception, they were forced to come to grips with the

concrete realities of their colonial situation, while their social model was more compatible with “the sun never sets on the Empire”, allowing them to construct insular laboratories detached from the movement of a century of war, urbanization and mass upheavals.¹⁰ Their principal source of funding at the time, by the Rockefeller Foundation, went under the rubric of “Social change in Africa”. These ethnographers, more than most, struggled with the contradictions of doing intellectual work in the modern world. It is convenient, but lazy to typify them as just one thing, imperialist stooges. They themselves recognized that they had to reconcile at least two things -- hence the double descent mythology personified by Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown.

If ideology derives life from ideas, the British school sought to derive ideas from life, devising a special style of writing in which concrete descriptions of live activities were used to support generalizations whose debt to the western intellectual canon was never made explicit. In the hands of Malinowski this could be a romantic literary exercise, linking individual actors and concrete events to a self-conscious narrative. Radcliffe-Brown aimed for professional consolidation, the promulgation of a scientific ethos, objectification of structure, abstract conceptualization. The functionalist ethnographers knew that they had to mediate between contrasting social situations -- their isolation as fieldworkers exposed to the lives of exotic peoples and their pressing need to reproduce themselves in an academic setting as a compartment of the guild. They were pulled outwards towards joining the peoples of the world and back inside academic bureaucracy at home.

This half-hearted commitment to abandon the ivory tower, while desperately seeking a regular place in it, was nevertheless unique when the rest of their peers remained resolutely locked up in their libraries, laboratories and seminar rooms. If the CAETS began that breach with academic introversion, it was by launching twentieth century anthropology’s most distinctive feature, making up stories about humanity based on living with real people. Modern ethnographers are a synthesis of fieldworker and theorist, two roles that the Victorians kept separate. The aspiration to combine life and ideas in one intellectual personality is remarkable for going against the whole trend of modern academia to separate the two. The monographs of British social anthropology will not be remembered for their ideas. The vivid analytical descriptions they offer of life on the periphery of western civilization more than compensate for their obscurantism concerning theory and method.

Perhaps these monographs will be valued retrospectively as a specific genre of anthropological writing that captured, if only allegorically, something essential in twentieth century world society. For ours is (or has been) a world of nation-states divided against each other; so much so that human unity has been

buried in a welter of national and ethnic consciousness. Nationalism is, after all, racism without the pretension to being systematic. Social anthropologists have long been seen as being compromised by the colonial empire where they conducted their field research, as foot soldiers in the service of indirect rule. As a British Viceroy of India once put it, “Let them have their little cultures, as long as we control the important things”.

I prefer another story. British social anthropology reproduced the dominant worldview of the last century which had all of humanity pigeonholed as separate tribes, each the owner (or would-be owner) of a nation-state. The idea of a *nation* represents an escape from modern history, from the realities of urban industrial life, into the timeless rural past of the *Volk*, the people conceived of as a homogeneous peasantry, living near to nature, unspoiled by social division, the very archetype of a community united by kinship. Before nationalism, western intellectuals compared their societies with the city states of the ancient world. Now they fabricated myths of their own illiterate ethnic origins in primeval forests.¹¹ The Malinowskians had more than an echo of that, which is unsurprising given the Polish adventurer’s personal connection to Central European nationalism.

The other half, Hegel’s vision of the state as both antidote to and vehicle for capitalism, conceives of society as a discrete, bounded territorial unit, governed from the centre according to impersonal rules, administered by scientific experts, itself the very embodiment of social order, employer of a university-trained professional class. It is not hard to see this aspect of modern society in Radcliffe-Brown’s influence as the arch structural-functionalist. British social anthropology flourished in an interwar period dominated by corporate states; and this, rather than the impulse to romantic nationalism, allowed the British discipline to adapt to the universities’ post-war expansion.

It would be idle to pretend that today’s practitioners of anthropology are free of this contradiction, even if habitual denigration of our predecessors as tools of colonial empire helps to obscure the fact. But the unravelling of functionalist ethnography, which is also the unravelling of the nation-state as human society’s universal form, belongs elsewhere. This essay is concerned with how British social anthropology made it from the nineteenth to the twentieth century; and so it is time at last to place W. H. R. Rivers in that transition.

Rivers was the founder of British social anthropology

What were the distinctive features of British social anthropology in its heyday around mid-century? The following would be a shortlist of features for an ideal type.

1. Ethnography: the habit of writing about one people circumscribed in time and space.
2. Fieldwork: the intensive study of living activities where they take place.
3. Ideas from life: abstract generalisations realized in concrete descriptions.
4. Kinship: the field of professional specialisation, especially the use of genealogies for formal modelling (“kinship algebra”).
5. Social structure: emphasis on a coherent system of social rules, not on culture or psychology.
6. Comparative method: sometimes limited to regional surveys.
7. Professional jargon: close specification of concepts and terms, as opposed to popular usage.
8. Functional integrity: the social or cultural whole expressed through institutional patterns in the here and now.
9. Culture contact: the form in which social change was addressed as practical anthropology.
10. Science of society: social anthropology as the sociology of primitive societies.

What did Rivers contribute to the development of this intellectual project?

1. Ethnography. His *The Todas* (1906) was considered at the time to be a pioneering example of the new intensive ethnography. Rivers was unusually transparent in listing his sources and this has been used to discredit his seriousness as an ethnographer (e.g. by Stocking). Functionalists tend to be more discrete or actually misleading. Malinowski’s monographs, however, are written at a wholly superior level, making Rivers look like a plodding amateur.
2. Fieldwork. This was the great message of the CAETS and Rivers later argued for long-term immersion on the part of a single fieldworker. He wrote up this approach at length in the official RAI handbook, *Notes and Queries*, for 1912. Even so, the shortcuts he took for granted reveal him as a transitional figure in the development of fieldwork practice.
3. Ideas from life. As part of the CAETS and after, Rivers developed the genealogical method (sometimes “the concrete method”). This consisted of mapping kinship relations within a community on a network diagram compiled from the perspective of multiple informants. The publication of this cubist solution to mediating the abstract and the concrete in modern society coincided with Picasso’s

Les Demoiselles d'Avignon (1907).¹² Rivers was always more open and precise on methodological issues than his functionalist successors.

4. Kinship. Meyer Fortes reconstituted the British school's focus on kinship as a direct line from L.H. Morgan through Rivers and Radcliffe-Brown to himself.¹³ This lineage is disputed, partly because Radcliffe-Brown downplayed his debt to his teacher. He took Rivers' dynamic genealogical method and turned it into the static kinship algebra for which British social anthropology became (in)famous.

5. Social structure. Rivers habitually separated the study of social structure from psychology and published his lectures on the subject. He was not however much influenced in this enterprise by Durkheim's sociology, unlike both Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown.

6. Comparative method. Rivers was interested in regional variations, but as a connected historical process, unlike both the evolutionists and the functionalists, who preferred to construct abstract taxonomies.

7. Professional jargon. This was Radcliffe-Brown's speciality, somewhat to Malinowski's disgust. Rivers put his energies into method and theoretical analysis.

8. Functional integrity. Rivers saw this -- how otherwise could he have developed a notion of social structure? But he chose to emphasize the wider historical context.

9. Culture contact. This was, of course, of primary concern to Rivers and Haddon as well as to the British school between the wars. They too gave the problem a functional twist, making synchronic histories (an oxymoron, one of several). This unrecognized legacy of Haddon and Rivers was submerged later in rhetorical denigration of "conjunctural history".

10. Science of society. Radcliffe-Brown mastered the rhetoric of science, but Rivers pioneered its practice. British social anthropology occupied a no-man's-land between science and literature, but Rivers believed he was building an impersonal scientific community, several in fact. Then the First World War took him in a more personal direction.

My aim is not to settle rival intellectual property claims for the invention of social anthropology, but to place individuals in a shared conversation about humanity. Rivers' contribution to that in the British context is far more than "the history of an error". He made both Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown possible and they in turn gave a decisive impetus to a discipline that was well-adapted to mid-century Britain and to the world at large.

But there is more to Rivers than a proto-functionalist ethnographer who failed to make the grade. He never abandoned his commitment to psychology and in this dialectic of emergent academic specialisms we find unfinished intellectual agendas which should inform our own efforts to know the world and ourselves. British social anthropology as a self-contained, coherent enterprise is long gone, leaving only a shadow of itself animated by the latest ideas from the United States and France.

Rivers between anthropology and psychology

William Rivers started out as a physiologist and had already established the first two experimental psychology laboratories in England before joining the CAETS to which he contributed studies of perception and the genealogical method. As a result of his neurological experiments with Head, he developed a two-stage model of nerve regeneration, the *protopathic* and the *epicritic* (see Note 4). He elaborated the sociological study of kinship and social structure; took his ethnological enquiries in the direction of German historicism and into the wilder regions of global speculation; became a psychoanalyst who applied Freud's ideas critically; and served as an army psychiatrist in the war, finding in the treatment of shell-shock victims a new version of social psychology. He ended his life as a socialist politician and friend of progressive literary men. In the last few years before his death, he had a personality transplant whose origins are depicted by Pat Barker in *Regeneration*. Once a conservative member of the academic establishment, a recluse with a stammer, he became the very model of an outgoing public intellectual.

There is much more to be told of this fascinating story.¹⁴ Rivers' first preoccupation was to build up several academic specialisms of which he was a practitioner. These were principally psychology and anthropology (in which he included ethnology and sociology). Indeed, as a modernist, he compartmentalized knowledge, serving as president of the national bodies supervising professional practice in anthropology and psychology in Britain. He brought to his disparate inquiries a common methodological outlook that never sacrificed the active investigating subject to the positivism then taking root in the universities. He sought to separate the study of society from that of individuals, for sure, much as chemistry was hived off from physics. He only discovered late that he combined these branches within himself.

In the last five years of his life, Rivers produced some forty pieces of work, of varying quality and length, while maintaining a punishing regime of professional and public commitment. Inevitably he wrote these pieces off the top of his head, relying on whatever was stored in his memory from decades of specialized practice. In the process his method became more autobiographical and self-reflexive; the

boundaries between disciplines became blurred in his synthesizing drive to comprehend and influence individuals' experience of society.

In his posthumous book, *Conflict and Dream* (1923), Rivers recalls one of his own dreams whose theme was "Hidden Sources". His first explanation was that the dream was about his frustration, because of overwork as an army psychiatrist, over not being able to reply to mistaken American critics of his kinship theories. Practically and in a deeper sense, a conflict existed between psychology and ethnology. But, pushing the analysis further, Rivers concludes that the dream reveals the harmony between psychoanalysis and ethnology, for they are based on the same method -- the excavation of hidden sources that help us to understand the complex history of human personality and culture.

Armed with this integrated vision of self and society, Rivers came out of the war ready to change the world, not just to understand it. In this he differed markedly from Radcliffe-Brown (who spent much of the war teaching in a Sydney suburb) and Malinowski (who, as we know, sat it out on a Pacific island). It was they, however, who forged an academic discipline attuned to the needs of the corporate state in mid-twentieth century Britain, not Rivers. What he might have done with Rockefeller funding is anyone's guess. Certainly the 1920s were conducive to explorations of relations between the new ethnography and psychoanalysis Malinowski was actively engaged with Freudian ideas at this time, until the exchange went badly from his point of view. There was support for it from Seligman. But the trend, both in anthropology and psychology, was towards divorce, not marriage. The name of the game soon became even more than before division of the professional pie.

It is more likely, had he lived, that Rivers would have become an academic outsider (something like his friend, Charles Myers who left the academy to found the Institute of Industrial Psychology without government support) than continuing as the central figure of two disciplines or the founder of a new academic synthesis. In that respect, Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown were more attuned to conservative times. But each of them failed to solve the problem of social reproduction as well. Malinowski fell out with all of his leading male students before fleeing the country for the United States; while Radcliffe-Brown died alone after a life of restless nomadism. Rivers premature death did allow them to reinvent themselves, at his expense, as the only begetters of British social anthropology. I have tried to make it clear that this foundation myth is bad history. This is a sound reason for revisiting the CAETS, the events of 1898 and their intellectual legacy.

If I have dwelt narrowly on the historical neglect of Rivers by contemporary anthropologists, Paul Whittle points out (Note 14) that his influence on modern psychology has sunk without a trace. This is

a pity for practitioners of both disciplines. Rivers published three books of psychology after the war, two of them posthumously: *Instinct and the Unconscious* (1920), *Conflict and Dream* (1923) and *Psychology and Politics and Other Essays* (1923). Taken together, they accord surprisingly well to twenty-first century sensibilities. Rivers was a Freudian who had no truck with memories of childhood sexuality (he survived a traumatic encounter of this type when five years old). Interpretation of dreams for him always started with their immediate stimulus in daily life, not with their deeper symbolism. In another age of globalizations, his emphasis on movement and attempt to situate the unequal encounters of different societies in real history has genuine resonance for us. A Rivers revival may or may not be on the cards. Perhaps it would take the dislocation of a major war for that. I wonder if Immanuel Kant, that other forgotten founder, will keep him company then.

Notes

1. Published online in *Science as Culture* (1998) <http://human-nature.com/science-as-culture/hart.html> as “The place of the 1898 Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to the Torres Strait (CAETS) in the history of British social anthropology”, a lecture given at a conference organized by Keith Hart and Paul Whittle, “Anthropology and psychology: the legacy of the Torres Strait expedition, 1898-1998”, St. John’s College, Cambridge 10-12 August 1998.

2. In ‘Why is anthropology not a public science?’ (unpublished paper, 2013, <http://thememorybank.co.uk/2013/11/14/why-is-anthropology-not-a-public-science/>), I trace my own insertion into “a cross between a cult and a lineage” in the 1960s. Half a century later, some would claim that academic anthropology has moved on, a position that I query in ‘What anthropologists really do’, originally published in *Anthropology Today* in 2004:

<http://thememorybank.co.uk/2017/02/10/what-anthropologists-really-do/>.

“The new anthropologist is a self-appointed people's representative in the double sense of writing them up and acting as their advocate. And anthropology is a sort of democratic politics, informed by long-term, empty-headed exposure to strangers wherever they live and shaped by the main public issues of the day. This populism is hostile to elites, especially experts; it is anti-intellectual and definitely anti-scientific. The ethnographer is confident of making a difference simply by being open to what ordinary people think and do. There are no shared ideas in this discipline and whatever passed for theory before is now dismissed as a preoccupation with outlandish customs for their own sake.”

3. *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (2006 [1798]), Cambridge UP
4. Pat Barker's Regeneration Trilogy consists of three novels set in the First World War and focused on Rivers as an army psychiatrist treating shell-shock victims while drawing on the writings of the soldier-poets, Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon: *Regeneration*, *The Eye in the Door* and *The Ghost Road*. Barker is married to a neurology professor who was interested in the Rivers/Head experiments in St. John's College, Cambridge – they cut nerves in each other's arms to see how long it took for feeling to come back, hence 'regeneration'. They believed that the best results came from scientists acting as their own experimental subjects. Barker found out about Rivers when accompanying her husband to the Rivers Archive there. Like me, she was smitten by him. All I have from it so far is this article. She has her great trilogy – and it really is magnificent. See also Richard Slobodin *Rivers: As seen in Regeneration* (1997).
5. *Anthropology and the Crisis of the Intellectuals*, Prickly Pear Pamphlets No.1
<http://www.thememorybank.co.uk/pricklypear/1.pdf>
6. Anita Herle and Sandra Rouse (eds) *Cambridge and the Torres Strait*, Cambridge UP (2009).
7. Julian Huxley, A. C. Haddon and A. M. Carr-Saunders *We Europeans: A survey of 'racial' problems* (1935) was a scientific critique of Nazi racism. When UNESCO invited leading British social anthropologists to contribute to its statement on *The Race Question* (1950), they abstained on the grounds that their academic discipline would be compromised by engaging with this "controversial" topic.
8. Aux origines du débat anthropologie/psychanalyse : C.G. Seligman, *Gradhiva* 6: 35-49 (1989)
9. Islands in the Pacific: Darwinian biogeography and British anthropology, *American Ethnologist* 23. 3 (1996), 611-638.
10. Reading their books, you would never have guessed that Panafricanism, mobilizing Blacks on both sides of the Atlantic to win back African land for its original inhabitants, was the most inclusive, far flung and heterogeneous political movement of the period. It was led by New World intellectuals such as W. E. B. Dubois, C. L. R. James, Aimé Césaire and his pupil, Frantz Fanon whose writings have still to appear on anthropology syllabuses half a century after the empires that they fought collapsed.
11. Martin Thom *Republicans, Nations and Tribes* (1995)

12. John Berger, *The Success and Failure of Picasso* (1993); Anna Grimshaw, *The Ethnographer's Eye: Ways of Seeing in Anthropology* (2001).

13. Meyer Fortes, *Kinship and the Social Order: The Legacy of Lewis Henry Morgan* (1969); Ian Langham, *The Building of British Social Anthropology: W. H. R. Rivers and His Cambridge Disciples in the Development of Kinship Studies, 1898-1931* (1981).

14. Richard Slobodin's *W. H. R. Rivers* (1978) is to my knowledge still the only biography. My partner in organizing the 1998 Cambridge conference, Paul Whittle, an experimental psychologist and historian of psychoanalysis (who alone in Cambridge at the time spanned these two great divisions of psychology) published a memoir of Rivers in his historical context, "W. H. R. Rivers: A founding father worth remembering" (1997), from which this essay's title is taken, <http://human-nature.com/science-as-culture/whittle.html>. A website, *Rivers: The Forgotten Healer* (<http://www.whrrivers.co.uk/>), is a mine of information for the curious.