

**THE BIRTH OF ANTHROPOLOGICAL FIELDWORK:
W. H. R. RIVERS AND A.M. HOCART
IN THE PERCY SLADEN TRUST EXPEDITION CENTENNIAL YEAR**



FIG. 1.—KUNDAITE, A WITCH-FENDER (p. 229).
PHOTO (FROM SIMBO) BY A.M. HOCART

Symposium hosted by the *Bergen Pacific Studies* research group,
Department of Social Anthropology, University of Bergen.
Convenor: Dr. Cato Berg (cato.berg@sosantr.uib.no)

26-28 November 2008, Bergen University Museum

This symposium will celebrate the centennial year for W.H.R. Rivers' and A.M. Hocart's fieldwork in Island Melanesia (1907-1908). Participants will give a reappraisal of Hocart's and Rivers' unpublished and published materials from the Solomon Islands (more specifically the New Georgia Group in the Western Solomons) as well as of Rivers' theories on kinship and ceremonial in Ambrym (Vanuatu). Attention will also be focussed on Hocart's entire published and unpublished materials from Simbo and elsewhere in New Georgia. The scope of the symposium and the combined experience of the participants should ensure the widest possible platform in approaching these classic works of anthropology, with a particular view to addressing the work by Rivers and Hocart in Solomon Islands, particularly their residence in 1908 among the inhabitants of Simbo, as perhaps the first sustained period modern anthropological fieldwork.

In 1907 William Halse Rivers, Arthur Maurice Hocart and Gerard Camden Wheeler travelled to the British Solomon Islands Protectorate to do fieldwork, funded by the Percy Sladen Trust. Originally, the three of them were meant to do fieldwork together in the New Georgia islands of the Western Solomons, but Wheeler set off further northwest to the Shortland Islands and the Bougainville Straits to work by himself. Rivers and Hocart spent three intensive months on the small island of Simbo (then known as Eddystone), and also did survey work in the islands of Vella Lavella, and Kolombangara and in the Roviana Lagoon. They also made visits further east at Savo, Guadalcanal and Malaita.

The expedition led to a wide-ranging corpus of published and unpublished works, which has been of great significance to generations of anthropologists working in the region and elsewhere, as well as having shaped a range of lasting theoretical themes and research questions concerning Island Melanesia. The fieldwork by Rivers and Hocart provided the foundations for the monumental epos *History of Melanesian Society*, published by Rivers in 1914. Although the two volumes of this work have later been accused of being faulty in terms of theory and characterised by piecemeal ethnography, it is hard to argue against the overall aim of the project as the first-ever comparative work on core Melanesian concepts of social organisation, leadership and cosmology.

This small but intensive symposium, hosted and funded by the Bergen Pacific Studies research group, will be attended by scholars in anthropology, geography and history who have worked intensively over many years with the materials of both Rivers and Hocart. Participants are **Tim Bayliss-Smith** (University of Cambridge), **Judith Bennett** (Otago University), **Cato Berg** (University of Bergen), **Christine Dureau** (University of Auckland), **Annelin Eriksen** (University of Bergen), **Edvard Hviding** (University of Bergen), and **Knut Rio** (Bergen Museum). A rapid follow-up of this symposium is planned in collaboration with the University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, through the museum director, **Nicholas Thomas**.

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PROGRAMME

WEDNESDAY 26TH NOVEMBER (chair: Cato Berg)

- 09:00-09:15 **Cato Berg:** Welcome and opening
09:15-10:00 **Tim Bayliss-Smith:** Rivers as “role-hybrid”, 1880s-1922
10:00-11:00 **Christine Dureau:** Admiration, Antipathy and Anthropological Ancestors
11:00-11:15 Coffee break
11:15-12:15 **Edvard Hviding:** Across the New Georgia Group: Inter-Island Connections, Inter-Temporal Methodology and A.M. Hocart’s Fieldwork
12:15-13:15 LUNCH, at På Høyden Restaurant
13:15-14:15 **Judith Bennett:** A Vanishing People or a Vanished Discourse? W.H.R. Rivers’ “psychological factor” and depopulation in Solomon Islands and New Hebrides
14:15-15:15 **Annelin Eriksen & Knut Rio:** Rivers and Ambrym kinship
15:15-16:00 Discussion

19:00 Conference Dinner: Maharaja Restaurant

THURSDAY 27TH NOVEMBER (chair: Edvard Hviding)

- 09:00-10:00 **Cato Berg:** The Genealogical Method: Vella Lavella Reconsidered
10:00-10:45 **Tim Bayliss-Smith:** Rivers’s “psychological factor” in the depopulation of Simbo: a re-assessment
10:45-11:00 Coffee break
11:00-12:00 Concluding comment by **Edvard Hviding;** Discussion
12:00-13:00 LUNCH, at På Høyden Restaurant

FRIDAY 28TH NOVEMBER

- 09:00-14:30 Post-conference meeting for presenters, at Solstrand Hotel, by Bjørnefjorden, 30 kms south of Bergen. Meeting includes lunch.

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ABSTRACTS

TIM BAYLISS-SMITH

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PART I: RIVERS AS “ROLE-HYBRID”, 1880S-1922

River's late publications on the depopulation of Melanesia need to be seen in the context of a remarkable career in which he transformed himself from medical practitioner to neuro-physiologist and experimental psychologist, and from that to the anthropologist that we know from the 1898 Torres Straits expedition, fieldwork in south India, the 1908 Solomon Islands expedition, and other visits to Melanesia. We also need to remember his involvement in neo-Freudian psycho-therapy in the Great War and his political activism in England in the 1920s. These transitions were not merely professional, they were also, as Langham (1981) convincingly argues, intrinsically personal -- part of his life-long aim to achieve a happier and more outward-going personality and a more integrated approach to science -- a shift from "epicritic" to "protopathic" sensibility if we adopt his own jargon. In this paper I argue that his edited book 'Essays on the Depopulation of Melanesia' (1922) needs to be seen not just as the product of his long-term interest in ethnology, but also as the outcome of a new outlook on life that was as much personal as academic in its origin.

PART II: RIVERS'S “PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTOR” IN THE DEPOPULATION OF SIMBO:

A RE-ASSESSMENT

Rivers was one of the first scholars to draw attention forcibly to the ongoing depopulation of the Melanesian islands, to document its magnitude on Simbo and Vella Lavella, and to question the still-dominant “extinction discourse” (Brantlinger 2003) that saw “vanishing races” as a regrettable but inevitable consequence of Western geo-political domination. His imaginative use of the 1908 genealogical data that he collected in the western Solomons with Hocart, and its analysis to provide a history of Simbo's depopulation, is a pioneer study in historical demography providing insights that are still unmatched for anywhere in Melanesia in the 19th century, apart from Fiji. However, his explanations for the phenomena that he documented are less impressive. His suggestion that Simbo women were too apathetic to conceive, give birth, or nurture healthy infants lacks any ethnographic foundation, and Rivers's dismissal of disease factors is a curious 'blind-spot' in view of his own medical background. His own reticence towards women and in matters concerning sexuality seems to have prevented him from considering the impact on fertility of sexually-transmitted diseases. It seems that, by 1922, his achievement of a more integrated (“protopathic”) personality and his experiences as psycho-therapist in the Great War had led him towards entertaining speculations about Simbo that are as unsupported by evidence as those that sustained his late work on cultural diffusion. It is as if he is determined to see traumatised victims of colonialism in Solomon Islands who are as “shell-shocked” as the soldiers from the Western Front that he treated in wartime hospitals. His large achievement in applying “the genealogical method” to historical demography should not blind us to these flaws of his interpretation of social processes.

CATO BERG

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THE GENEALOGICAL METHOD: VELLA LAVELLA RECONSIDERED

The “genealogical method”, as developed by William Halse Rivers Rivers, has been praised as a hallmark and even birthplace of anthropological inquiry, giving one of the first frameworks for dealing with kinship and descent. Since its inception, the genealogical method has also been the target for critical voices, even from Rivers’ students and friends. But a recent commentator such as Scheffler is more generous towards Rivers, both in terms of concepts and method. This paper seeks to give a brief background of Rivers’ mode of inquiry in fields of kinship, as it was initially conceived in the Torres Strait, honed in his work among the Toda (still hailed as a magnificent piece of anthropological writings), through his use of it in Solomon Islands. It is a little known fact that Rivers’ work on demography and death rates in Vella Lavella, as seen in the outcome, *The Psychological Factor*, relied on his application of kinship data, and not only statistics, collected among the Western and Eastern coast of Vella Lavella. I will retrace the route he and A.M. Hocart sailed around that island, then carefully reassess the kinship data from Irigila, in the North-West corner of Vella Lavella. I will address some of the most important shortcomings of his analysis, based on application of the genealogical method, and also carefully reappraise the scientific value of the materials in terms of history and as a source of cultural heritage in Solomon Islands.

JUDITH BENNETT

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University of Otago*

A VANISHING PEOPLE OR A VANISHED DISCOURSE? W.H.R. RIVERS’ “PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTOR” AND DEPOPULATION IN SOLOMON ISLAND AND NEW HEBRIDES

When W.H.R. Rivers’ *Essays on the Depopulation of Melanesia* appeared in 1922, depopulation in that region as well as the wider Pacific was hardly novel, but Rivers’ claim that the “psychological factor” as a major cause of this was, at least in terminology. Depopulation, however, had been almost synchronous with the advent of the European in the Pacific Islands. Interrogation of the subject continued well into the twentieth century, evoking various theories regarding its nature and causation. Ranging from the literary critic, to the administrator, planter, anthropologist, and medical doctor, such interested parties used Rivers’ “psychological factor” or caricatures of in discourse to defend their positions or to advance their causes.

CHRISTINE DUREAU

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ADMIRATION, ANTIPATHY AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL ANCESTORS

Many anthropologists draw upon the field notes, manuscripts and publications of earlier ethnographers by way of conceptualizing socio-cultural change and continuity, creolization, etc. In doing so we typically consider the cultural and political placement of those earlier anthropologists who are so important to our own work. Much analysis of these anthropological “ancestors” is highly critical, focusing on matters of representation and colonial or imperial emplacement. This is highly important, but it also tends to be presentist and moralistic, almost as if we are trying to distance ourselves from critiques of the

discipline: by “othering” those who have preceded us in our fieldsites, we can implicitly present ourselves as *not* colonial or imperial. This paper asks how we can represent earlier fieldworkers without recuperating old progressivist histories of the discipline. I critically reconsider my earlier treatment of Hocart and Rivers in light of these questions. My paper is primarily concerned with developing questions rather than suggesting answers at this point. Such questions go beyond earlier fieldworkers to include those, such as missionaries, who are “awkward” subjects of historical anthropological analysis when our goal is to understand them as cultural beings without losing sight of their political placement and activity.

ANNELIN ERIKSEN

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KNUT RIO

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RIVERS AND AMBRYM KINSHIP

The Percy Sladen Trust expedition to Melanesia in 1908 took W.H.R. Rivers from the Western Solomons and all the way south through the New Hebrides – as a journey through evolutionary time. He was working mostly from the mission ship “Southern Cross” where the interviews made onboard – through missionary interpreters - led to the *History of Melanesian Society*. Later, the return to New Hebrides in 1914 and further extensive interviews on Tangoa island with the Rev. Fred Bowie led him to take a particular interest in Ambrym kinship. In his work Ambrym island holds a particular position in the evolutionary schema – as he perceived it to be a fossil of earlier forms of Melanesian social organization, and in his writing struggled to make it conform to his models. In this paper we go back to his writings for an assessment of this very early ethnographic contribution to Ambrym social organization.

EDVARD HVIDING

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ACROSS THE NEW GEORGIA GROUP: INTER-ISLAND CONNECTIONS, INTER-TEMPORAL METHODOLOGY AND A.M. HOCART’S FIELDWORK

The six months of fieldwork carried out by W.H.R. Rivers and A.M. Hocart in Solomon Islands in 1908 provided main materials for the two-volume *History of Melanesian Society*, published by Rivers in 1914. But most of the ethnographic materials from this very early example of modern fieldwork remained unpublished until Hocart in 1922 started his series of detailed descriptive papers in the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*. As an ethnographer of another part of the Western Solomons, I came to Hocart’s published corpus on “Eddystone” and his archived fieldnotes after my own long-term fieldwork in the Marovo Lagoon. I realized that these not widely recognized materials constitute an extraordinary background for analyzing inter-island relations in the recent history of Island Melanesia, for examining continuities and discontinuities for the Western Solomons in a regional sense, and (to me) for comparative interpretations of possible pan-New Georgian patterns of core cultural concepts from the twin vantage points of Simbo in the far west and Marovo in the far east. In this paper I highlight Hocart’s approach to the fundamentally inter-island nature of ostensibly local phenomena, and I exemplify how his 1908 materials from Simbo connect in remarkable ways to oral history from Marovo. I discuss aspects of Hocart’s methodology and epistemology, and the opportunities his materials give for comparison in time and space from their 1908 “snapshot” of New Georgians situated between the precolonial and the colonial.