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Domesticating the savage

...it was a principal object of our work to discover, if possible, racial characteristics.

(McDougall, 1903, p. 189)

The detailed findings published by the scientists who were members of the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to the Torres Strait in 1898 represent a very different site of investigation from those of the missionaries. For these are the works of university-based scholars — academic reports based on the scientific analysis of data they collected from observations and testing of and interviews with Torres Strait Islanders themselves. In fact, it is precisely because the collection and analysis of the data adhered to the underlying principles of scientific method, that the various Cambridge reports carry a degree of weight. Here at least, we might well suppose, the representations of Torres Strait Islanders should provide us with ‘accurate’ and ‘objective’ representations of who and what Islanders were at the time of the expedition.

A superficial reading of the reports that they wrote on their return to Cambridge may well confirm for the scientific and scholarly community the validity of much of the contents. In such a reading, any peculiarities would now be understood in terms of the historical context of the expedition with the data re-interpreted from a late twentieth century perspective. Indeed, the centenary of this expedition has already been marked by a renewed academic interest in both its history and its findings (Hart, 1998; Whittle, 1997). Anthropologists and experimental psychologists in particular are even now rediscovering and reconsidering the importance of this expedition in the formation of their disciplines and ‘revisiting a formative event of one hundred years ago... to throw light on our own contemporary search for a new paradigm’

(Hart, 1998, p. 3). For this was an ambitious, groundbreaking expedition not only in terms of proportion and logistics but also in terms of its theoretical and methodological innovations. It was an expedition at the cutting edge of the social sciences — those new scientific disciplines and knowledge emerging at the turn of last century.

The Cambridge expedition had been stimulated by an earlier collection of ethnographical data gathered by Alfred Cort Haddon. A marine zoologist, Haddon had relinquished his position as Professor of Zoology to pursue his new-found intellectual and research interests in cultural anthropology after visiting the Torres Strait in 1888. He was convinced that anthropology should be grounded in rigorously collected and collated scientific data and, as such, was one of the new breed of ethnographically centred anthropologists who became the model for the twentieth-century discipline (Hart, 1998, p. 6). Arguing that ‘no investigation of a people was complete that did not embrace a study of their psychology, and being aware of the paucity of our knowledge of the comparative physiology and psychology of primitive people’ (Rivers, 1901, preface), Haddon determined that a team of psychologists should also be part of the expedition. These men were the ‘founding fathers’ of these disciplines, revolutionaries who were drawing the boundaries of academic theory in the early years of the twentieth century. The expedition, and their ideas, were to have a major significance long after their reputations had vanished from academic consciousness and been replaced by later ‘founding fathers’ such as Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown (Hart, 1998; Whittle, 1997).

Haddon’s approach challenged the boundaries of what was already known and understood about primitive people, and his expedition to the Torres Strait stands as one of the most comprehensive early attempts to document the lives and characteristics of a primitive society before the onslaught of colonial expansion changed Torres Strait society forever and before the previous skills and knowledge of the Islanders were lost to the world.

However, in terms of this book, these scientific texts represent a different site in another sense as well. For, unlike the missionaries, the scientists did leave — and what they deduced and wrote went with them. Their findings were not relayed to the Islanders daily; they were not drummed into their heads as were the ideas of the missionaries. Although the six volumes of their reports took decades to publish — 1901, 1904, 1907, 1908, 1912, 1935 — the scientists themselves were present in the Torres Strait for only a few months. Drs William HR Rivers, Charles S Myers and William McDougall spent from May to September

1898 carrying out tests and observations on Murray Island, while from May to July Sidney H Ray, Anthony Wilkin, Charles S Seligmann and Haddon were in Papua New Guinea. In October the expedition officially broke up although Myers, McDougall, Seligmann, Ray and Haddon did not go on to Sarawak until the end of April 1899. Until recent years, few Islanders — including myself — knew little about these findings, let alone how to access them.

While many authors on Torres Strait issues (e.g. Beckett, 1987; Singe, 1989; Sharp, 1993) make reference to the content of these reports, there is no direct evidence that any material effect on the lives of Islanders directly resulted from this huge body of writing. For these were academic treatises designed to expand the intellectual landscape of the then infant social sciences. Their purpose was to objectively observe and document, not to change or distort what they were observing and documenting. Yet, in effect, the work of these scientists was later to do precisely this. For they were to shape and inform disciplines, leaving behind a legacy embedded in knowledge that has not yet been properly recognised or acknowledged (e.g. Roldan, 1993). As such, this invisibility makes the legacy of their work all the more insidious.

Now, more than ever, these reports are being consulted by authors writing on the Torres Strait (e.g. Beckett, 1987; Singe, 1989; Sharp, 1993; Mullins, 1995) — as historical sources and as authoritative accounts of what Islanders once were and the way they once lived. They are considered to contain data that provide accurate snapshots of a vanished culture. Now, more than ever, these reports are accessible to Islanders who can use them in the search for their own antecedents. Islanders interested in their history can now find details once lost to them from the genealogies, collected in particular by Rivers, which help them to authoritatively trace their connections to each other and to past generations. They are able to do this from the descriptions, painstakingly collected by Haddon, of past practices and customs that provide an understanding of tradition and heritage; and from the linguistic studies, compiled in detail by Ray, that provide insights into languages that were spoken a century ago ‘before they were corrupted by outside influences’. In this light in particular it is important for researchers to have an accurate measure of the significance of these reports both to their own and to others’ understanding of Islanders’ past and present. Most importantly, the analysis of these authoritative texts can be used to determine how the forms and processes of the scientists’ rationale and methods have provided both the conditions and the limits to the way Islanders could be understood historically and can be understood now and in the future.

The seven-member research team landed on Thursday Island on 22 April 1898. On their arrival, the scientists found to their dismay that things had already considerably changed for the Islanders in the Torres Strait. The Islanders' lives had been adversely affected by a burgeoning marine industry that harvested the *bêche-de-mer* (sea cucumber) and the mother-of-pearl shell. This had attracted a lot of people with financial interests who were exploiting the Islanders as a cheap labour force. As we have seen, in the eastern region of the Torres Strait, where the islands were more isolated, missionaries from the London Missionary Society (LMS) in England had control of the communities and were busily introducing a new moral order designed to retrieve the Islanders' souls from the devil. By this time the Queensland government had also stepped in to regulate disorder in the commercial sector and to protect the welfare of all Islanders in the Torres Strait, including those under missionary control. The Islanders, in this way, found themselves invaded and besieged from a number of quarters, overwhelmed by the different regimes and new forms of regulation as commerce, Christianity and an emerging colonial bureaucracy combined to usher them into the alien world of twentieth-century capitalism.

Undaunted, the project for the Haddon-led expedition was simply given an added and, if anything, more urgent purpose. The Cambridge team was now 'to recover the past life of the islanders, not merely in order to give a picture of their former conditions of existence and their social and religious activities, but also to serve as a basis for an appreciation of the changes that have since taken place' (Haddon, 1935, p. xiv). The accurate charting of native languages, the natives' primitive psychology, as well as their traditional culture, were now priorities for the team who knew that there would be no second chance. The new sense of purpose required concentrated efforts to extricate and describe what constituted the Islander before the arrival of the marine industries, government agencies and missionaries, as the project had never been about assessing the impact made by intruders from the West on Islanders or documenting the damage done to whole communities by the inroads of commercial enterprises, Christianity and an early colonial bureaucracy. In this way, the expedition gained its first overtly political overtones.

It is important in the context of this book to stress that by no means were these Cambridge scientists testing and observing in a theoretical vacuum. They came from a university already hundreds of years old, a university that had seen the knowledge it was producing increasing exponentially during the nineteenth century. They left their book-lined libraries to travel halfway around the world to test their theories.

And they returned to their libraries to assess their data, consult with the relevant literature on the subject and write their reports. They also lectured, debated and produced seminal works in developing disciplines. Their aim was to produce a comparative study — a sort of ‘before and after’ chapter of the human race.

To chart the characteristics of ‘the savage mind’, the team proposed to directly compare Islanders and Europeans on a broad range of validated scientific tests. They then cross-referenced their data with the scientific knowledge gleaned from other studies of different groups before drawing their conclusions. By this process the scientists did much more than describe and report on the characteristics of Islanders and their society. They inscribed the Torres Strait Islander in a particular and already prescribed relation with European people, with ‘other savage people’, and with European knowledge. In doing so, they embedded the Islanders in an evolutionary history that they felt explained the continuing inequality between the different racial groups of the world. It is this action, and the subsequent relation that it engendered at the level of knowledge which is with us still, that limits understandings about Islanders and defines the parameters of the position that was constructed for them.

To missionaries and scientists alike, Islanders were a people from the past. The position of Islanders has been framed, pre-conditioned and subsequently described, explained and understood — disciplined — by a scientific community of scholars. It is to illustrate how these pre-conditions infiltrated and shaped the scientists’ interpretation of data as well as how this circumscribed, informed and limited the conclusions they were able to draw on Torres Strait Islander characteristics. Scientific research is embedded in mental abstractions, hypothetical constructs and illusions concerning the natural world. It is both imbued with personal bias and riddled with unacknowledged and unrecognised subjectivities. What scientists ‘know’ or ‘investigate’, and what they consequently ‘understand’ about the objects of their study, is built up using the ideas, images and shapes they have recorded within their emerging disciplines. What they have learned and validated provides a limit to their personal perceptions and the questions they pose for themselves, which in turn restricts their ability to develop abstractions and construct hypotheses about their objects of study which remain alien to their comprehension. They cannot ‘know’ something if they do not possess either the vocabulary or experience to recognise and position that knowledge in either an accurate or even a truly meaningful way. Through these references scientists consciously and unconsciously construct their illusions — their view of the reality of the world in which they live, or,

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in this instance, the world in which the people they are observing live. I will attempt to illustrate this over the next four chapters; first in relation to linguistics, then in turn psychology, physiology and anthropology. The objective is to highlight how disciplinary practices as well as the thinking of the day on civilised and uncivilised people come together to domesticate the Islanders as savages.