

# Alfred Reginald Radcliffe-Brown\*

## 1881-1955

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The death of Professor A. R. Radcliffe-Brown in London on October 24, 1955, at the age of 74 brought to an end an epoch in the development of anthropology. For those of us who knew him personally as students or friends, there is a deep sense of loss, for as a teacher he had the gift of communicating understanding and as a friend he was wise and kind. In historical perspective he is the primary creator of modern social anthropology, now the dominant anthropological discipline in Great Britain and the Commonwealth, and of growing importance in the rest of the world as well. As Fortes has said, "No living scholar has had so decisive an influence on the development of social anthropology as A. R. Radcliffe-Brown."

We know little of his childhood and youth, perhaps because of a long fight with tuberculosis which left his lungs impaired and contributed ultimately to his death. He was born in England on January 17, 1881, and educated at King Edward's High School in Birmingham and at Trinity College, Cambridge. The turn of the century brought important developments in the field of philosophy and in the nascent science of anthropology. Radcliffe-Brown, reading in Mental and Moral Science, came into contact with Rivers, Whitehead, and later Haddon, and when Rivers shifted his interests from psychology to anthropology, he became his first pupil.

From Rivers and Haddon came the stimulus to field research, and Radcliffe-Brown spent the years 1906-1908 in the Andaman Islands. His fellowship for Trinity College was a conventional reconstruction of Andamanese culture history (see the Appendix to *The Andaman Islanders*), but almost immediately he set about to rewrite it. For while teaching at the London School of Economics and at Cambridge, he became aware of the work of the French Sociologists, Durkheim and Mauss in particular,

and thereafter was concerned primarily with the meaning and function of rites, myths and institutions.

Two years of research in Australia (1910-1912) made him acquainted with the intricacies of kinship and social organization among the Kariera and other tribes and gave him new insights into totemism and myth. Returning to England he published "Three Tribes of Western Australia" (1913) and completed his rewriting of *The Andaman Islanders*, though it was not to be published until 1922.

During World War I he served as Director of Education for Tonga, an assignment which he did not particularly relish but which gave him a firsthand knowledge of the difficulties and pitfalls of applied anthropology. Soon after the war he was in Africa, and with the establishment of a Chair of Social Anthropology at the University of Cape Town, he set about to organize the School of African Life and Languages and to develop a research program in social anthropology. In 1926 he moved to Sydney to develop a similar program with even greater success. He organized an extensive program of field research and founded the Journal *Oceania*. Building on his earlier researches he presented a major synthesis in "The Social Organization of Australian Tribes" (1930-31), still the basic study for the region.

In 1931 Radcliffe-Brown came to Chicago as a visiting Professor of Anthropology. For the first time in many years he had no administrative burdens and greater leisure to write and teach. He renewed his earlier acquaintance with American Indian social organization, developed his conceptions of primitive law and social sanctions, and laid the framework for the modern treatment of the lineage. He systematized and expanded his conception of social anthropology as the comparative study of society in a brilliant series of lectures and seminars, and encouraged

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\* We are greatly indebted to Meyer Fortes' Preface to *Social Structures, Studies Presented to A. R. Radcliffe-Brown* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1949) for biographical details, and to Robert Redfield's *Introduction to Social Anthropology of North American Tribes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1937; 1955) for evaluations. Meyer Fortes has recently written on "Radcliffe-Brown's Contributions to the Study of Social Organization" in the *British Journal of Sociology*, Volume VI, No.1, March 1955.

the application of social anthropological methods to Western and Far Eastern societies, as well. He became an important and controversial figure in American anthropology; as Redfield has observed, "Professor Radcliffe-Brown brought to this country a method for the study of society, well defined and different enough from what prevailed here to require American anthropologists to reconsider the whole matter of method, to scrutinize their objectives, and to attend to new problems and new ways of looking at problems." The high point of the Chicago period was perhaps his seminar debate with Mortimer Adler on "The Nature of a Theoretical Natural Science of Society" (1937), the transcript of which unfortunately has not yet been published.

In 1937 he returned to England to occupy the newly created Chair of Social Anthropology at Oxford. While he had played an important role in the development of social anthropology in practically every continent, England was his spiritual home (as France was his intellectual home), and he returned with great hopes. But the onset of World War II brought teaching and research to an end. He served as President of the Royal Anthropological Institute for two years, went to Brazil on a cultural mission, and helped lay the foundation for the post-war program of research in Africa and Asia, but was retired soon after the war at the age of 65, much against his will.

After retirement he taught for a few years at Farouk I University in Cairo and later at Grahamstown, South Africa, where he found a climate congenial to his bronchial difficulties. From here he continued to make important contributions, including the editing (with Daryll Forde) of "African Systems of Kinship and Marriage" (1950) and the organization of his collected essays and addresses in "Structure and Function in Primitive Society" (1952).

Surviving a serious fall which broke several ribs, he returned to England for his last years. Between bouts with pneumonia he was his old self, a charming host and brilliant conversationalist with a love for the amenities of life. He retained his intellectual vigor to the end, a final paper on "Local Groups in Australia" carrying on a controversy about one of his favorite topics.

This is not the time or place to attempt an assessment of Professor Radcliffe-Brown's contributions to anthropology. Early in his career he made a radical break with anthropological tradition and developed a

program for the testing of theoretical generalizations against the results of field research. He recognized Malinowski's pre-eminence in the latter field and sent many students to him for training in field methods, but he continually worked at the development of "an explicit and systematic method for the scientific study of societies," and provided us with illuminating examples of what could be accomplished in that direction. Doing much of his field research in regions with little or no documented history, he was highly critical of the conjectures which passed for history in the early decades of this century. But we remember well his encourag[e]ment of our own early researches on historical contacts in Northern Australia, and on historical changes in the kinship systems of American Indian groups, where documentary or other data were available to check historical inferences.

Essentially, Radcliffe-Brown was an anthropologist's anthropologist. While he wrote with elegance and style, he was primarily interested in conveying ideas directly through personal contacts. He was not interested in disciples; rather he encouraged students to think for themselves. In return they have honored him by the presentation of two volumes of essays, one at the time of leaving Chicago and one to mark his retirement from Oxford. In these the reader will find some indication of R-B's influence on the profession.

From the professional associations he received most of the honors in their power to bestow, including the Presidency of the Anthropological Section of the British Association for the Advancement of Science (1931) and the presidency of the Royal Anthropological Institute (1940 and 1941), as well as various special lectureships. We had hoped to bring him back to Chicago as an honored guest at the 25th Anniversary Celebration of the Social Sciences Building last November. In writing to one of us, a few months before his death, of the unfavorable verdict of his doctors, he added:

"Nothing could give me greater pleasure than to be back on the campus, to see again the seminar room and my 'office,' to have time for leisurely talk with you and Dorothy and others, and to make contact with a new generation of students. Alas! it cannot be. The tuberculosis I fought as a boy is having its delayed effects in the weakness of my lungs. But I have passed the limit of 'three score years and ten' so am quite content."

Perhaps one of Professor Radcliffe-Brown's greatest contributions will turn out to be the breaking down of provincialism in anthropology. As one of the first "international" anthropologists he has done much to bridge the gap between American and British anthropology and to reduce ethnocentrism on both sides of the Atlantic. The present post-war exchange of professors and students is continuing this process, to the great advantage of anthropology as a whole. We venture to predict that Radcliffe-Brown will ultimately stand – with Boas, Malinowski, Kroeber and others – as one of the major architects of modern anthropology. It is perhaps time to stop arguing over their respective merits and to begin to synthesize the best of each.

Professor Radcliffe-Brown is survived by a daughter, Mrs. Allan Pike, and by a host of students, colleagues, and friends. We hope the inspired rituals he invented for appropriate occasions will continue whenever his friends meet, and when the talk gets around to serious subjects, we may possibly hear a familiar voice saying: "Now the mother's mother can only be understood as...."

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A. R. RADCLIFFE-BROWN<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A more complete bibliography will be found in the volumes listed in the notes.