

# A Lost Period of Applied Anthropology

[originally published in *American Anthropologist*, 64:593-600, 1962]

CONRAD C. REINING

*The Library of Congress*

RESEARCH into the history of applied anthropology in the British Empire shows that references to the practical values of anthropology go back to the very beginnings of anthropology and ethnology as recognized fields of study. That the early British anthropological societies were not strictly academic is not so surprising if we realize that they had their origins in the active humanitarian movements of the time, especially the anti-slavery activities.

After securing the abolition of the slave trade in 1807 and the Emancipation Act of 1833, abolitionists turned their attention to questions affecting the general welfare of the native peoples of the colonial dependencies (Hailey 1944:5). In 1838 an Aborigines Protection Society was established in London. It was said of the founder, Dr. Thomas Hodgkin, that he wanted first of all to study the native peoples and to help them only after he had learned how they lived and what they wanted. Early in its history a serious division of opinion developed within the society about the proper methods for protection of aborigines. The faction associated with missionaries wanted to protect the rights of the aborigines by bestowing on them immediately the "privileges" of European civilization, while the more academic faction wanted to study the native races in order to understand them in the process of raising and protecting them. The latter group left the organization and formed the Ethnological Society of London in 1843 (Keith 1917:14).

In the journal of this society in 1856 appeared a claim to the practical importance of the new subject:

Ethnology is now generally recognized as having the strongest claims in our attention, not merely as it tends to gratify the curiosity of those who love to look into Nature's works, but also as being of great practical importance, especially in this country, whose numerous colonies and extensive commerce bring it into contact with so many varieties of the human species differing in their physical and moral qualities both from each other and from ourselves (Brodie 1856:294-95).

The new society was not, however, received quite so categorically by the public. It seems to have been regarded as a rather sentimental

negrophile organization with a thin veneer of scientific pretension. A popular journal of the day attacked ethnology for being an inexact and tentative science with little practical value or popular interest. The Ethnological Society was accused of talking for talking's sake and of unduly extending its scope in order to include everything comprehensible (*Pall Mall Gazette*, Jan. 17, 1866).

By 1863 the Ethnological Society was split over the slavery question and over the question of whether man is of one or more than one species. The divergent faction took the name of the Anthropological Society of London. The two organizations ran in competition for about eight years, each marshalling "scientific" evidence to support its claims as to the equality or inequality of man. Practical use was made of anthropological arguments to support philanthropy or to attack vested interests (Myres 1944:3).

The new society was highly successful from the view of membership. In 1867 it had the impressive total of 706 members, in contrast with the Ethnological Society whose greatest membership was 107 in 1846 (Cunningham 1908: 10--11). This success was the result of popularization of the subject and of frequent discussion in the society's meetings of such topics as religion, politics, and the position of the Negro. Dr. James Hunt, the leading light in the new organization, offered evidence that the Negro was of a different species from the European and, furthermore, that the Negro differed mentally and morally even more than physically from the European. He considered the Negro to be a man, however, and felt that he should be treated as such (Hunt 1863:3). The attitude held by Dr. Hunt and his followers that Negroes could not be expected to assimilate civilized ways did not prevent them from writing of the "horrors of the slaughter" of the aborigines of Queensland and Tasmania going on at that time (*Popular Magazine of Anthropology*, 1866: 6), apparently without realization that their argument about the inequality of races was similar to the justifications used by the white settlers for the "dispersion" of the aborigines.

The interest shown in race matters by the members of the Anthropological Society of London was only part of the considerable discussion they carried on about the practical applications of anthropology, for this was a period of intense interest in such applications. The leaders of the Anthropological Society were concerned that anthropology not be regarded as purely speculative and abstract, and editorially stated that anthropology was "more intimately related than any other branch of science to the sympathies of humanity, and ... the utilities and requirements of society" (*Anthropological Review*, 1866: 113). In 1866 this society published a *Popular Magazine of Anthropology* containing numerous articles on the value of applied anthropology. The claims ranged from modest speculations to lurid, sweeping statements. On the more modest side were passages such as this:

Anthropology, independently of its scientific interest and importance, may and should become an applied science, aiding in the solution of the painful problems which human society and modern civilization proffer, and tending to the bettering of the conditions of man in the aggregate all over the world.

Or, in speaking of the Queensland aborigine hunts:

Anthropological science, like all sciences, is passionless on the point, but a better knowledge of its deductions and principles would have instilled some feeling of prudence and pity into the murderers, who seem to revel in the unnatural process of extinction (*Popular Magazine of Anthropology*, 1866: 6).

This magazine was an experiment in the popularization of the anthropological attitudes and knowledge of the day. It was published as a result of the belief that the diffusion of literature on the subject was calculated to benefit all classes of society and all races of man, and that a more general study of anthropological material would aid in the emancipation of the human mind from preconceived notions. There was an especial claim for anthropology to have the power of assisting all races of man to material prosperity and happiness (1866: 1-2). The more extreme hopes are illustrated in this passage:

Physical anthropology, when applied to practical purposes, must come to every home; the enthusiasm of youth, the fitful despair of advanced age, and the steady glow of a hopeful intellect, steeled for youth to a patience of "the strings and arrows of outrageous fortune" – All these may be diagnosed and classified by the practical anthropologist with great advantage. His diagnosis will thus contribute to a knowledge of race-

character, and pave the way to a better future state (1866: 97).

Antagonism to the ethnologists, however, brought forth the most far-reaching of the claims for practical anthropology:

Does ethnology take any heed of the social condition of man? Does ethnology presume to search into causes of epidemics among civilized man? Does the ethnologist consider how to apply the series of facts obtained for the bettering of the domestic condition of the poorer classes of the community – to trace the hidden causes of mental aberration with a view to practical measures for the prevention of lunacy – to investigate race and the affinities of races, so that results may become valuable to social reformers and statesmen? I believe almost everyone will agree with me when I say, no! Yet all these things are but a portion, and a comparatively small portion, of the duties of anthropologists (MacKenzie 1866: 67-68).

Dr. Hunt claimed that "there is no science that is destined to confer more practical good on humanity at large than the one which specially investigates the laws regulating our physical nature." He urged that anthropologists should not be "dreaming theorists, but ... every truth discovered must be for the benefit of humanity at large." He seemed confident that the government must give the same aid to anthropologists that it gave to geologists, since it was not reasonable to care more for the extinct than for the living forms of life. He also considered it to be the duty of the universities to make the science of mankind a special study; he looked forward to the day when all universities would have professors whose sole study would be the philosophy of mankind. While state aid was certain to come, in his opinion, he felt it wise to appeal to private enterprise to assist in carrying out this national work, and considered the establishment of a good and reliable museum to be one of the best ways of arousing interest in anthropology (Hunt 1863:2-12).

These early anthropologists were filled with confidence in their new science and felt it had limitless potentiality for the betterment of man. They also considered themselves to be able to view man dispassionately on a scientific basis as contrasted with the previous "metaphysical" view. They would admit no subject to be out of bounds to them, making a particular point that no philosophy or religion was exempt from their inquiries (*Anthropological Review* 1866: 289). At the same time, they were aware of resentment towards anthropology which they attributed mainly to two influential groups which, although they differed widely on many points, agreed in

denouncing anthropologists. In fact, much of the opposition to the Anthropological Society was based upon the views of its members on the inequality of races. The first of these opponents was the evangelical religious body which proceeded on the beliefs in the garden of Eden and the flood and that God made all the nations of the earth of one blood. The second group was composed of the political liberals who objected to the notion of inequality of men on the basis of social justice (*Anthropological Revue* 1866:113-14).

On the continent of Europe there was a reaction against the popular anthropology of the mid-19th century. In 1839 William Edwards had difficulties in forming an organization in Paris similar to the Aborigine Protection Society, because of a ruling against societies having for their object the discussion of social or political questions, even though a Société des Amis des Noirs which had had the purpose of working for the abolition of slavery had been formed in 1788 (Buxton 1929: 781). The difficulty was surmounted by the adoption of a scientific-sounding title for the new organization – the Ethnological Society of Paris (Hunt 1865:xcvi-xcvii). A police agent attended its meetings, however, to see that it kept within orthodox limits. The Madrid Anthropological Society was suppressed after a short life (Cunningham 1908: 11).

The membership of the Anthropological Society of London fell off after its initial flush, and after severe financial difficulty and the death of its sponsor, Dr. Hunt, it combined again with the Ethnological Society in 1871. The two societies had been battling for a number of years about the proper name for the new discipline. Apparently there was quite a deadlock on this matter in the negotiations for amalgamation, for the firm action of Professor Thomas Henry Huxley was necessary to bring about agreement on the use of the name anthropological for the reconstituted organization (Cunningham 1908:12).

Although the new Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland took its name from the old Anthropological Society of London, it took none of the policy. There was a clear change in the interests of British anthropology after the amalgamation of the two factions in 1871. The new organization tended to consolidate its position by quietly gathering information on its area of interest and to expend its efforts in becoming a respectable institution. Not a word about policy appears in its journal,

which implies that the society was trying to live down the violent period of the 1860's. However, there was not complete agreement within the organization and some of the former members of the defunct Anthropological Society of London seceded, in the early days of the new Institute, in order to found still another organization: the London Anthropological Society. This society published one volume of memoirs, for 1873-75, in which its president stated that the society had been formed for the study of the science of anthropology in all its branches. He suggested some topics to show the range of interest of the new organization: the causes of the variation in form of the human skull; the extent of prognathism and microcephalism in Europe; her[e]ditary deformities; the difference of the blood corpuscles in various races; human parasites; acclimatization of man; race antagonism; Phoenician colonies; migration and its influence over race characters; the diseases, vices, and crimes of civilization; the doctrines of Malthus and the remedies for poverty; and causes of longevity; Darwinism; music as a race test and the influence of music upon mankind; the effect of diet on the races of man; the physical effects of the adulteration of food and impure air; the effects of premature and over-education; the origin and value of modern spiritualism; the physical effects of superstition; and the origin of human speech (Braunholtz 1943:3; quoted from *Anthropologia*, 1873-75:3).

The organization was short-lived and the Anthropological Institute went on with no further radical offshoots. Professor T. H. Huxley has been credited with the establishment of sound guiding principles in the various branches of anthropology; he helped to repress certain elements, such as the persons who, taking advantage of the glamour of the Darwinian theory, talked nonsense in the name of anthropological theory, and he exposed others who saw in the structure of the brain and other parts of the body an impassable gulf between man and the monkey. His steadying influence upon British anthropology was important during this period and his conservative attitude toward anthropology and its applications, as illustrated by this quotation, sounded a new note that was to become the trend in the future:

Mankind will have one more admonition that the people perish for lack of knowledge. The alleviation of the miseries and the promotion of the welfare of men must be sought by those who will not lose their pains in that diligent, patient, loving study of all the multitudinous

aspects of Nature, the results or which constitute exact knowledge or science (Smith, G. E. 1935:200,204).

For about 30 years after the establishment of the Anthropological Institute, the practical value of anthropology was only rarely mentioned. The efforts of anthropologists were primarily aimed at getting anthropology accepted by the universities. No one had been trained in anthropology, for the early proponents were usually professional men who regarded anthropology as a hobby. In correlation with the emphasis on physical anthropology and the interest in the matter of the races of man, many of the early ethnologists and anthropologists were physicians. At least one of these, Dr. J. C. Prichard, is said to have chosen the medical profession mainly because it gave him opportunities for indulging in his anthropological tastes (Haddon 1934: 105).

The first academic recognition in Great Britain of the new science came when E. B. Tylor was established at Oxford in 1883. Another sign of the acceptance of academic anthropology came in 1884, when a separate section for Anthropology was established in the British Association for the Advancement of Science (Myres 1931:205).

The interest in applied anthropology was not completely dead, nonetheless, for an occasional reference to it can be found. E. B. Tylor, in the conclusion to his best known work, *Primitive Culture*, stated that ethnography could be used in two ways for the good of mankind: to impress men's minds with a doctrine of development, in light of past progress, and to expose the harmful remains of old culture. In so aiding progress and in removing hindrances, he maintained, the science of culture is essentially a reformer's science (Tylor 1871:410). Later he wrote, again in the closing paragraphs of a scholarly work, that the study of man and civilization is not only a matter of scientific interest, but enters also into the practical business of life, and that it may guide us to our duty of leaving the world better than we found it (Tylor 1881: 439-40).

Professor W. H. Flower, speaking as President of the Anthropological Institute in 1884, alluded to the practical importance of ethnography to those who rule other peoples. He urged that statesmen should not look upon human nature in the abstract, but should consider the special moral, intellectual, and social capabilities, wants, and aspirations of each particular race with which they have to deal. He pointed out that a knowledge of the special

characteristics of native races and their relations to each other has a more practical object than the mere satisfaction of scientific curiosity, that such knowledge is vital to good administration, and may be the basis for the happiness and prosperity of millions of subject peoples (Flower 1884:493).

Even such vague statements seem to have been rather exceptional, for the general trend from 1870 onward was for the subject of anthropology to become more and more esoteric and to eschew practical applications. Professor J. G. Frazer denied that anthropology had anything to do with the practical problems of statesmen (Smith, E. W. 1934:xiv). He believed his duty was to describe preliterate peoples in order to illuminate the history and evolution of society. He would admit anthropology to be of practical value only in the vague sense that "it might become a powerful instrument to expedite progress if it lays bare certain spots in the foundation on which modern society is built" (Frazer 1900:xxi-xxii).

The pattern set by Frazer indicates the divergence of academic anthropology from practical considerations. Not only were anthropologists trying to live down the attempted popularization of their subject, but the scope of their interests within the field was such that they did little of interest to the workaday world. Their interest was in the past, their research was centered on the evolution of society. The strong influence of the biological concepts of Darwin as to natural selection and survival of the fittest were adopted to ways of thinking about societies being evolved through a series of stages. This procedure, plus the classical interests of such scholars as Tylor, Frazer, Robertson Smith, and MacLennan, produced numerous volumes on the history of various customs and institutions. Primitive communities were of interest as parallels to hypothetical stages of evolution of human society. Such communities were studied not as total units, but as collections of customs which were analyzed and compared out of their contexts. The resulting material was, nonetheless, of undeniable interest and the quality of the scholarship of these anthropologists furthered the acceptance of anthropology as an academic subject.

We see now that, after the violent period of anthropological controversy and popularization in Great Britain, which was engendered by the crisis in the slavery question during the 1860's, there was a period of quiet reaction and consolidation. The period of the 1860's cannot

be said to be of any great or lasting importance for it was forgotten in the period which followed, and it may be called a lost period of applied anthropology. (This impression was heightened by the fact that E. B. Tylor's copy of the popular magazine published by the Anthropological Society of London, which I used in Oxford for this study, had lost its bindings in its 85 years but still had all pages uncut.) And when, about the beginning of the 20th century, there again began to be active British interest in the practical potential of anthropology, no one seems to have been aware of the former intensive interest. In 1903, the President of the Anthropological Institute commented on the need for popular education to show the public the value of anthropology and said that anthropologists had been so engrossed in research or in routine duties that they had not made sufficient effort to draw attention to matters which might appeal to the public (Balfour 1903: 18-21).

The various applications of anthropology have been discovered time and again; the potentiality of anthropology for the betterment of man in general, and native peoples in particular, has been brought up anew from time to time. For instance, in the proposals for the establishment of a School of Applied Anthropology in Great Brit[ai]n in 1921, we find the remark that "the anthropological point of view should permeate the whole body of the people" and that the lack of this "was the cause of our present troubles" (Peake 1921:174).

In 1938, Professor B. Malinowski expressed a view on the subject which could be matched with some of the views of the 1860's, though he thought the idea to be a new one, the result of a new trend :

... the anthropologist with all his highly vaunted technique of field work, his scientific acumen, and his humanistic outlook, has so far kept aloof from the fierce battle of opinions about the future and the welfare of native races. In the heated arguments between those who want to "keep the native in his place" and those who want to "secure him a place in the sun," the anthropologist has so far taken no active part. Does this mean that knowledge serves merely to blind us to the reality of human interests and vital issues? The science which claims to understand culture and to have the clue to racial problems must not remain silent on the drama of culture conflict and of racial clash.

Anthropology must become an applied science. Every student of scientific history knows that science is born with its applications (Malinowski 1938:x).

And when we find, for example, in the writings of two American anthropologists in the 1940's, the statement that "humanitarian" anthropology

was evolved only in recent years (Chapple and Coon 1942:4), they appear to be unaware of the ideas expressed in the much earlier period of popular and applied anthropology.

#### REFERENCES CITED

- ANTHROPOLOGICAL REVIEW  
 1866 Race in legislation and political economy. 4:113.  
 1866 Race in religion. 4:289.
- BALFOUR, H.  
 1903 Anthropology, its position and needs. *Man* 33:11-23.
- BRAUNHOLTZ, H. J.  
 1943 Anthropology in theory and practice. *Journal of Royal Anthropological Institute* 73:1-8.
- BRODJIE, SIR B. C.  
 1856 Address. *Journal of Ethnological Society* 4:294-97.
- BUXTON, TRAVERS  
 1929 Slavery. *Encyclopaedia Britannica* 14th ed. 20:781.
- CHAPPLE, E. D., and C. S. COON.  
 1942 Principles of anthropology. New York, H. Holt.
- CUNNINGHAM, D. J.  
 1908 Anthropology in the 18th century. *Journal of Royal Anthropological Society* 38:10-35.
- FLOWER, W. H.  
 1884 On the aims and prospects of the study of anthropology. *Journal of the Anthropological Institute* 13: May 488-501.
- FRAZER, J. G.  
 1900 The golden bough. 2nd ed. London, MacMillan.
- HADDON, A. C.  
 1934 History of anthropology. London, Watts.
- HAILEY, LORD  
 1944 The role of anthropology in colonial development. *Man* 44: (5) : 10-15.
- HUNT, JAMES  
 1863 On the study of anthropology. *Anthropological Review* 1: 1-20.  
 1865 President's address. *Anthropological Review* 3: lxxxv-cxvii.
- KEITH, SIR ARTHUR  
 1917 How can the Institute best serve the needs of anthropology? *Journal of Royal Anthropological Institute* 47: 12-30.
- MACKENZIE, K. R. H.  
 1866 On popular errors concerning anthropology. *Popular Magazine of Anthropology* 2:60-71.
- MALINOWSKI, B.  
 1938 Methods of study of culture contact. Memorandum 15, International African Institute, London, Oxford University Press.
- MYRES, SIR JOHN L.  
 1944 A century of our work. *Man* 44:(4):2-9.
- PALL MALL GAZETTE  
 1866 Popularized ethnology. Jan. 17, 1866. Reprinted in *Popular Magazine of Anthropology*, 1866,80-82.
- PEAKE, N. J. E.  
 1921 Discussion. *Man* 21:(103):174.
- POPULAR MAGAZINE OF ANTHROPOLOGY  
 1866 Anthropology a practical science. 1: (1) :6-9.
- SMITH, E. W.

- 1934 Anthropology and the practical man. Journal of  
Royal Anthropological Institute 54:xiii-xxxvii.
- SMITH, SIR G. ELIOT
- 1935 The place of T. H. Huxley in anthropology.  
Journal of Royal Anthropological Institute  
55:199-204.
- TYLOR, E. B.
- 1871 Primitive culture. London, John Murray.
- 1881 Anthropology. London, Macmillan.