

Alěš Hrdlička, 1869-1943

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ALĚŠ [Aleš - JM] HRDLIČKA died on September 5, 1943. He was in his seventy-fifth year. With Hrdlička's death there has passed from our midst a figure who has had an important influence upon the development of anthropology, especially physical anthropology, in the United States.

Alěš Hrdlička was born in the city of Humpolec, Bohemia, March 29, 1869. His father, Maxmilian, was a master cabinet-maker; his mother, Caroline, was the daughter of a cabinet-maker. Hrdlička attended the elementary and high schools of his native city until he was thirteen years of age, when his parents resolved to migrate to New York. Hrdlička was thirteen and a half years old when he and his family arrived and settled in New York. For about six years after his arrival on these shores Hrdlička worked with his father in a tobacco factory.

In 1888 Hrdlička fell seriously ill with typhoid fever. His attending physician, Dr. M. Rosenblueth, a former Jewish Rabbi, observing the serious-minded cast of his youthful patient, suggested that young Hrdlička put his factory life behind him and embark upon a medical career. This suggestion Hrdlička received with enthusiasm, and soon, under Dr. Rosenblueth's guidance as preceptor, Hrdlička was enrolled as a medical student at the Eclectic Medical College of the City of New York.

In 1892 Hrdlička graduated from the College first in his class. Two years later Hrdlička, again leading his class, graduated from the New York Homeopathic Medical College. In this same year he published his first paper, and from that year on, without a break, he continued to produce an average of eight papers (many of considerable length) every year until his death.

In October, 1894, Hrdlička took up a research position at the new State Homeopathic Hospital for the Insane, at Middletown, New York. Here Hrdlička was brought face to face with the problem of measuring the human body, as well as the brains of autopsied bodies. It is from this time that his interest in anthropometric methods may be said to date. This is confirmed by the fact that when, in 1895, he was invited to join the staff of the newly founded Pathological

Institute of the New York State Hospitals, he decided first to visit Europe where, in Paris, he studied anthropometry under Leon [Léonce - JM] Manouvrier. To the latter Hrdlička later dedicated his own book on that subject, *Anthropometry* (1920, in its second edition entitled *Practical Anthropometry*, 1939). Upon his return to New York in 1896 Hrdlička married a young French-woman, whom he had met originally at the Eclectic College, Marie S. Dieudonnee. Mrs. Hrdlička died in 1918. The marriage was childless. Hrdlička married again in 1920, and the second Mrs. Hrdlička survives him, there being no children by this marriage either.

At the Pathological Institute Hrdlička commenced his anthropometric researches in earnest, and with the aid of some twenty collaborators he accumulated a great amount of data. Most of this material was subsequently lost in a fire, but Hrdlička managed to produce several studies on the basis of it in 1897, long before the destruction of the main body of data.

In 1898 Hrdlička accompanied Lumholz on the latter's last trip to Mexico. In Mexico Hrdlička came into contact with the Tarahumares, the Huichols, and the Tephuanes. This experience opened up the whole field of American anthropology to Hrdlička's vision. In 1899 he resigned from the staff of the disintegrating Pathological Institute to take charge of the physical and medical anthropological research on one of the Hyde Expeditions for the American Museum of Natural History, carrying out systematic trips to the southwest and Mexico yearly to the end of 1902. In 1903 a new Division of Physical Anthropology was created at the National Museum in Washington, and here, on May 1, 1903, Hrdlička assumed his duties as Assistant Curator in Charge. In 1910 he was appointed full Curator, a post which he held until his retirement in 1941. It is not too much to say that the collections in physical anthropology at the National Museum, the most complete of their kind, were almost entirely due to the unremitting labors of Hrdlička. The greater part of the craniological collections have been described in

detail in six "Catalogues of Human Crania in the U. S. National Museum" (1924, 1925, 1927, 1928, 1931, 1942). These catalogues are indispensable to all students of human craniology.

With his appointment to the National Museum, in 1903, the studies to which Hrdlička was to devote almost every moment of his conscious life assumed a measure of definite form: he would be a physical anthropologist. He would study the origin and evolution of man, and he would study the problem of the antiquity of man in the Americas. The remainder of Hrdlička's life was fruitfully spent in the practical realization of these decisions. Hrdlička's energy was boundless. His studies took him all over the world, and wherever he went he played the part of missionary for the nascent science of physical anthropology. In the furtherance of that cause he devoted the greater part of his life, his energy, his money, and his wisdom. Physical anthropology in America owes more to the missionary zeal of Hrdlička than to any other single worker.

Hrdlička's devotion to the cause of physical anthropology culminated in his founding of the *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* in 1918, a successful journal which he edited continuously until 1942. In 1928, entirely due to the initiative of Hrdlička, the American Association of Physical Anthropologists was organized and established. The success of these two undertakings was principally Hrdlička's doing. In his native Czechoslovakia he substantially advanced the study of physical anthropology by contributing funds for the development of such studies in that country, and by subsidizing the foundation of a Chair in Anthropology at the Charles University in Prague under the "Ales and Marie Hrdlička Foundation."

Studies and reports in the form of papers and books poured from Hrdlička's pen at a simply incredible rate; there are more than 350 items in his bibliography, and most of these items reflect the rare kind of intense industry of, which Hrdlička was capable. Among the many important works which were published by Hrdlička, *The Skeletal Remains of Early Man* (1930) shows him at his best. This book, in the writer's opinion, is still the best account of the skeletal remains of early man, up to the year 1930, which has ever been published. Hrdlička a personally examined practically all the materials reported upon in this volume, and the facts are set out with great exactness, clarity, and caution.

Among the outstanding books which came from Hrdlička's restless pen may be mentioned *Physiological and Medical Observations Among the Indians of Southwestern United States and Northern Mexico* (1908), *Early Man in South America* (1912), *Physical Anthropology: Its Scope and Aims* (1919), *Anthropometry* (1920), *The Old Americans* (1925), *Anthropological Survey in Alaska* (1930), *Children Who Run on All Fours* (1931), *Practical Anthropometry* (1939), *Alaska Diary* (1943).

In all problems relating to physical anthropology Hrdlička's was an authoritative voice. His contributions towards our understanding of the prehistory of man in Europe, Asia, and America, though at one time in some quarters considered unorthodox, are today everywhere accepted as the sound interpretation of the evidence they are.

In many respects Hrdlička's methodology belonged to the nineteenth rather than to the twentieth century. He was passionately interested in bones, particularly in the external details of their variation, details which he would record in paper after paper, without any real attempt to indicate the reasons for their recording or to interpret their significance. Having very little knowledge of mathematics Hrdlička was quite unprepared to understand the development of modern statistical methods, and is known to have declared that "statistics would be the ruin of physical anthropology." As editor of the *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* he played an important part in discouraging the use of advanced statistical methods in papers submitted to the journal. Hrdlička's knowledge of genetics was also severely limited, so that he failed to grasp the capital importance of genetic science for the future development of physical anthropology. This was truly unfortunate, for had Hrdlička been able to understand this it would have made him glad.

Hrdlička's heroes in physical anthropology were Broca, Virchow, and Manouvrier, and his conception of physical anthropology as a descriptive science was much the same as theirs. The type of experimentally-minded studies which Boas carried out and encouraged was not the sort of thing which appealed to Hrdlička. Hrdlička, in short, was an indefatigably industrious observer and describer, gifted with a love for details and their accurate recording. His mind was distinctly not of the original variety, and his imagination might have been less inhibited had he possessed a better understanding of scientific method, for that he had imagination

no one who knew him well, or had carefully read his books, could have any real doubt.

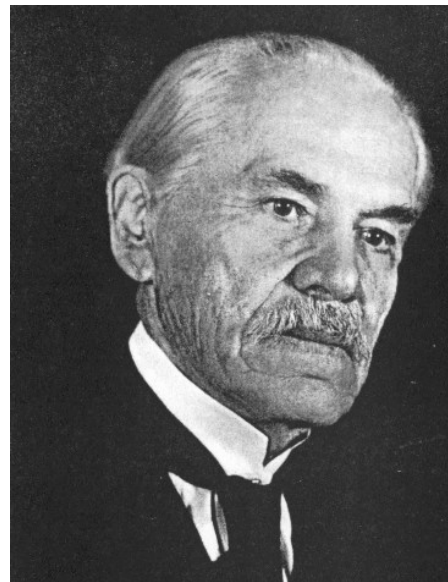
In his manner Hrdlička tended towards the delivery of ex cathedra judgments in a somewhat pontifical style. Hrdlička had done so much for physical anthropology, and for the greater part of his life, had stood so long as the guardian angel over it, that he came to develop something of a proprietary interest over the field. This manner often amused his listeners, and irritated some, without, however, serving to diminish their respect for him personally or for his very real achievements. The esteem in which Hrdlička was held by his colleagues was expressed in the testimonial dinner which was given to him in honor of his seventieth birthday by the American Association of Physical Anthropologists at Philadelphia April 4, 1939, and in the publication of a whole volume of the *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* (volume 24)¹ which was presented to him at the meeting of the Association held in 1940.

Hrdlička was a kindly soul, and appeared much more formidable than he really was. He would take banter very good-naturedly from a younger man, and he could laugh long, and very heartily, at his own and others' stories. In many ways he was almost eccentric. He had, for example, a strong antipathy to women in science, declaring on one occasion that "the proper place of the woman was in the home." He would avoid all possible contact with women at scientific meetings. He is also known to have walked out of a scientific meeting where the sexual life of monkeys was being discussed by a well-known authority. He considered the reference to such matters at meetings improper. In some ways Hrdlička reminded one of a little boy, a shy little boy. I remember on one occasion inquiring of him the literal meaning of his name. He said, "Ah, Montagu, if I tell you that you will laugh at me." I assured him I would do nothing of the sort. He then said, "Well, it means a dove, a little white dove," and as he said these words he giggled and blushed to the roots of his snow-white hair. He was a complete personality. This good and noble soul was ever ready to extend a helping hand to all who came to him for assistance, and he was utterly devoted to the cause of truth. He claimed to belong to no political party, and it is therefore of interest, at the present time, to be able to record that he had

a boundless admiration for the achievements of Soviet Russia, while for Japan he expressed his sorrow for the wrong path that that country had taken. In Russia he was given complete freedom to go wherever he wished, in Japan he was, from his arrival to his departure, followed by secret service men. He once told a small group of us how, in Japan, calculating that owing to the shorter legs of the Japanese he would be able to take longer steps than the gentleman who, on one occasion, was following him, he led his would-be shadower a merry dance exhausting and outwalking him!

It is in keeping with Hrdlička's tireless spirit that at the age of seventy he should embark upon another expedition to Siberia. The present writer met him at University College, London, early in June, 1939, at a tea given in Hrdlička's honor. He had just recovered from a severe illness, but he would not be deterred from continuing with his trip to Siberia. Of that land Hrdlička remarked to me that afternoon, "If you ever want to have your spirit chastised, try Siberia." Hrdlička delivered a lecture on evolution later in the afternoon at University College. Sir Arthur Keith, J. B. S. Haldane, Geoffrey Morant, and many other eminent scientists were in the audience. The chairman, Professor D. M. S. Watson, introduced Hrdlička as "America's most distinguished physical anthropologist." It is the most fitting judgment with which to conclude this notice – Ales Hrdlička, "America's most distinguished physical anthropologist."

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¹ For an excellent biographical account of Hrdlička, and for the detailed bibliography of his writings, by Dr. T. Dale Stewart, see this volume.