
Ralph Piddington was part of a cohort of anthropologists who attended the University of Sydney in the mid to late 1920s, who developed a strong sense of themselves as emissaries of a new discipline. This was no doubt encouraged by A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, foundation professor of Anthropology. [1] Piddington commented, some years later, that he enjoyed the ‘solidarity … [during] the old days of the Group’, as he called them, their solidarity being increased by anthropology’s newness and hence its opposition to other ‘decaying disciplines’. These young anthropologists, which included H. Ian Hogbin [2], Raymond Firth, Lloyd Warner [3], C.W.M. Hart [4], W.E.H. Stanner [5] and the linguist Gerhardt Laves [6], confident in themselves and their position, were on a journey to make a career in the new discipline of social anthropology. [7]

Ralph O'Reilly Piddington was born in Sydney on 19 February 1906, the son of Albert Bathurst Piddington, judge and legal reformer, and Marion Louisa Piddington (nee O'Reilly), eugenicist and sex educator. [8] He attended Sydney Grammar. Enrolling in the year Radcliffe-Brown arrived in Sydney he completed a double degree in Psychology and Anthropology, graduating in 1928. The following year he worked as an assistant in the Institute of Industrial Psychology. [9] In 1930 and again in 1931 he undertook anthropological research in Northwest Western Australia at La Grange Bay. [10] On both occasions Marjorie Piddington (nee Barnes) travelled with him. [11] On his second visit they were accompanied by the American linguist, Gerhardt Laves. [12] In between he was awarded a fellowship to attend the university of Hawai’i to undertake six months training under the supervision of Australian racial psychologist Stanley Porteus. [13] Porteus advertised for a person who had ‘firstly, a thorough competence in Psychology, including, if possible, some Post Graduate qualification, and secondly a good knowledge of the culture and language of the Australian aborigines more particularly of the Northern part of Western Australia.’ [14] A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, foundation Professor of Anthropology in the University of Sydney, believed Piddington uniquely satisfied the requirements. Piddington ‘has passed the degree of MA in Psychology with honours, also presenting himself for the degree of MA in Anthropology.’ Piddington, after training in Honolulu, returned to La Grange in August 1931 where he conducted ‘certain psychological tests … with a view to obtaining information on the question of racial differences in mental traits.’ [15] He returned to Sydney in January 1932.
Soon after, in an interview published in *The World* (January 14, 1932), he raised the treatment and conditions of Aboriginal people in Western Australia. Headed 'Aborigines On Cattle Stations Are In Slavery' and in a later report "Treatment of Aborigines. World’s plea for better conditions receives Attention Abroad" (3 April 1932). In July the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that 'allegations of slavery' had been taken up by the London based Aborigines' Protection Association. These reports reached the desk of A.O. Neville, Commissioner for Native Affairs. He accused Piddington of traducing the state of Western Australia and engaged in a long rebuttal of Piddington's allegations. He made inquiries about Piddington when he was at La Grange. It was reported that Piddington 'had displayed some erratic behaviour…. He’d been seen drunk and waving the red flag!'. There was even an inference that he had not behaved correctly with local women. This resulted in the Australian National Research Council, supported by A.P. Elkin, professor of anthropology at the University of Sydney (he had succeeded Radcliffe-Brown), attempting to withdraw Piddington's Rockefeller Foundation fellowship to undertake doctoral studies at the London School of Economics. They failed. [16]

In June 1932 he travelled to London where he joined another Sydney graduate C.W.M. Hart, who shared his advocacy for minorities. They had a lifelong friendship. [17] University of Wichita anthropologist Dorothy Billings thought of them both as 'social reformers.' [18] He had travelled with Marjorie but their marriage did not last. It was during this time, in London, that they divorced and he married Marjorie Carr, an actor. They had one child, a son, born in 1934. [19]

His research at La Grange formed the foundation for his doctoral studies. [20] Piddington’s interests lay in the problems presented by 'mythology and dreams in native life, and in the theoretical aspects of the relations between social anthropology and psychology.' Initially Charles S. Seligman was his main supervisor but, on his retirement, supervision was taken over by Raymond Firth and John Carl Flugel of University College. 'an experimental psychologist, but first and foremost … a practising psychoanalyst.' [21] He attended short courses by Professors Cyril L. Burt and Flugel, and courses conducted by Dr Margaret Posthuma, 'Psychiatric Case Discussions'; at the invitation of Dr M.R. Brady (Hartley street), he began the treatment of one of Dr Brady’s patients. He was awarded his PhD in 1935, for his thesis: 'Culture and Neurosis: A study of the part played by cultural forms in the production of individual mental abnormalities and the light cast by such abnormalities upon the nature of social structure, together with a comparative examination of certain primitive societies from this point of view.' Between then and his appointment in 1938 as lecturer-in-charge in anthropology and keeper of the Anthropology Museum at the University of Aberdeen he worked on editing the papers of the Pacific anthropologist R.W. Williamson, while he was 'Rockefeller Research Assistant on a half-time basis'. [22]

At Aberdeen he was free to 'entirely ... develop anthropology as I thought best'. [23] It was, as William Fyfe, Principal and Vice-Chancellor, declared, a new discipline 'of great and increasing importance'. [24] The Aberdeen *Press and Journal*, reported that 'In the course of his inaugural lecture, Dr Piddington indicated the general outline of the aims, methods, and scope of modern anthropology.' He underlined 'its importance and the vast range of scientific and practical problems which it was called upon to face'. He stressed that the
primary duty of anthropologists was ‘the study of living human communities, and the concentration of interest upon what human institutions are, how they work, and what they mean to the natives, rather than upon what they may have been in the written past.’ He argued strongly against historical reconstruction, stating that ‘the available evidence rarely enables us to learn anything worth knowing about it. Very occasionally a historical digression is of interest, but with very few exceptions historical studies oscillate between vague generalities and precise irrelevancies’. [25] He held true to these views, with few exceptions or additions, throughout his professional life.

During the Second World War he served in the British Army as a psychologist (1941-44). He returned to Australia in late 1944 to work with the Australian Army’s Directorate of Research and Civil Affairs. [26] In 1945 he was second in command to Colonel J.K. Murray at the Australian Army School of Civil Affairs, Duntroon, which later became the Australian School of Pacific Administration, which was responsible for training officers to work in the Australian territories of Papua and New Guinea. He returned to Britain in 1946 to take up the appointment of Reader in Social Anthropology in the University of Edinburgh. While there he wrote the first volume (1950) of a two volume (1957) work, *An introduction to Social anthropology.* [27]

In 1949 he was appointed foundation Professor of Anthropology at the University of New Zealand (Auckland), a position he held until his retirement in 1972. [28] Despite the London based committee of Raymond Firth, E.E. Evans-Pritchard and Darryll Forde recommending Piddington his appointment was nearly derailed. A.P. Elkin [29], professor of anthropology at the University of Sydney, had been invited to provide an assessment of the candidates. His dislike of Piddington is evident, starting from his anger over Piddington making public his criticisms of the Western Australian government’s treatment of Aboriginal people in the early 1930s. Subsequently Elkin ensured that Piddington would not return to Australia; in fact, Piddington returned only once other than service during the Second World War. [30] Elkin also deplored Piddington’s heavy drinking. H. Ian Hogbin, who had known Piddington from their student days, worked with him during the war. He had last seen him, in London, in 1936. In his view Piddington’s deterioration had been steady, declaring he ‘isn’t the man he was ... when I saw him in London’. [31] A student in Piddington’s introductory lectures in the early 1960s, anthropologist Michael Jackson, recalled that ‘rumours circulated about his Parkinsonism and fondness for whiskey.’ [32]

When appointed to the Chair Piddington was 43, described as being in appearance ‘of middle height, with greying hair, and wears a small fair moustache.’ [33] Jackson described him, ten years later, ‘with thinning hair, rheumy eyes, and palsied hands, ... a frail, florid-faced man who ... stood behind the lectern in a faded academic gown.’ [34] Other ex-students recall Piddington as an engaged lecturer; for example, anthropologist and educator Joan Metge described him as ‘A gifted teacher, Piddington communicated his passionate belief in anthropology and its relevance in carefully crafted lectures, made memorable by a fund of jokes.’ American anthropologist Dorothy K. Billings, a Fulbright scholar in 1955, described Piddington to me as ‘a wonderful teacher, always on time, prepared, tolerant, funny, clear; hurrying across the campus, robe flying out behind.’ [35]

Piddington’s lectures, a Cook’s tour, as he called it, of primitive peoples, ‘reciting his litany
of ethnographic facts, native terms, and formal definitions’, was little changed over the
years. [36] As Biggs points out Piddington had written An Introduction to Social
Anthropology that served as the primary text. [37] Biggs describes ‘how until the second
volume was published, dog-eared drafts of it were passed among Anthropology tutors and
lecturers’. [38]

Anthropologist, ethnobiologist and ornithologist Ralph Bulmer [39], who succeeded
Piddington, noted in his speech at the naming of the ‘Piddington Room’ (Anthropology
Reading Room), that Piddington ‘chose to develop a “traditional” Department … containing
all the main branches of our discipline – Prehistory, Physical Anthropology and Linguistics as
well as Social Anthropology’. [40] This met the requirement of Auckland University College
Council, to establish a School ‘which shall provide for studies in the whole field of
anthropological science’. (Piddington had previously established a similar structure at
Edinburgh). In addition, he initiated and developed Maori studies, and with the linguist Bruce
Biggs made Maori language central to university study in New Zealand universities.

Theoretically Piddington was firmly ensconced in Malinowskian functionalism, what Jackson
saw as his ‘dogged defense of Malinowski’s Functionalism’. [41] Ralph Bulmer could not
resist making the point that Piddington was unfashionable in his attachment to Malinowskian
functionalism, ‘at a time this became unfashionable among most of his colleagues. [42]

His advocacy and raising concern over social justice issues never left him. Once in Auckland
he was active in supporting Maori aspirations. He challenged the New Zealand government’s
policy of assimilation and its cousin integration. He embraced ‘action anthropology’ (a
concept developed by Sol Tax), which aimed to empower indigenous and minority groups to
make their own decisions, even to the extent of deciding on appropriate and relevant
research projects. This allied with his enthusiastic support and advocacy of ‘social
symbiosis’, was powerful critique. At the 1957 Australian and New Zealand Association for
the Advancement of Science conference held in Dunedin, he argued that colonised peoples
(such as Maori) did not simply abandon their own ways to adopt introduced ones but
developed new forms out of traditional practices in a process he called ‘emergent
development’. He argued that ‘Maori and Pakeha would co-exist in a relationship of mutual
dependence, while recognising differences between their cultures.’ [43] These ideas were
hailed by Maori leaders as validation of their own plans, but ignored by government officials
working to assimilate Maori into mainstream society. [44]

Of course, he couldn’t abandon the value of practical or applied anthropology to assist.
Picking up on his experience with the School of Civil Affairs he planned courses for
administrators working with Maori and in the Pacific. The government declined funding.

Piddington’s overarching legacy was his ‘prescience in sponsoring the teaching of the Maori
language, and of Maori studies, at a very early stage in the history of the department, was an
enormous credit to him’. (A view supported by Biggs who speaks of Piddington’s ‘temerity’
in introducing these subjects). Bulmer stated that a result of making a general department
was particularly important to archaeology and linguistics in Oceania, ‘who between them
have totally transformed our knowledge of the prehistory of Oceania’. [45]
Piddington retired on 31 January 1972 as professor emeritus, leaving the Anthropology department ‘firmly established and widely respected’. [46] He died at Takapuna on 8 July 1972.


[9] Established in 1927, the institute developed tests for vocational guidance and personnel selection.


[15] Marjorie Piddington and Ralph Piddington, op. cit., 343. See also Ralph Piddington, ‘Psychological Aspects of Culture Contact’, *Oceania*, 3, 3 (1933), 12–24; Ralph Piddington and John T. Graham, *The Future of Missions*, Aberdeen, 1940; Piddington also wrote a social anthropology textbook, *An Introduction to Social Anthropology*, Edinburgh, 1950, the first volume of which was published soon after his arrival in Auckland. It was for many years the only comprehensive textbook in the discipline. Volume 2 was published in 1957.


[17] Besides Piddington and Hart the other Australian recipients of a travelling Rockefeller Fellowship were H Ian Hogbin and Phyllis Kaberry.


[20] Most of his information was gleaned through interviews; he hardly moved out of the confines of the area around the settlement. He and Marjorie stayed in a room at the Post Office and spent their days at the ‘blacks camp’ about a quarter of a mile away. He relied, moreover, on a single informant, Yuari — allegedly a ‘deviant personality’—who provided nearly three quarters of his data. His brother, Nirmbd, was Piddington’s other main informant. See also *An Introduction to Social Anthropology*, vol. 1, 1950, 76–105.


[23] Piddington to Firth, 4 March 1939. FIRTH/2/6. See also Tom Molony, *Nyerere: the early years*. James Currey, 2014, 111, 162–168. Molony makes the statement that Piddington ‘had an enormous impact’ on Julius Nyerere’s early life (2014, 6). Nyerere was the first President of Tanzania.


8/1/96.


[36] Anne Salmond with Alan McFarlane, 6 mins. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qUPqHH1YL5g. His lectures basically followed the chapters in his *An Introduction to Social Anthropology*.

[37] Boyd and Oliver, 1950.


[40] Ralph Bulmer 1979. Joan Metge, Research Notes re Professor Ralph Piddington, MSS and Archives Vault 148, Special Collections, University of Auckland Library.


[44] Joan Metge. 'Piddington, Ralph O'Reilly', Dictionary of New Zealand Biography, first published in
2000. Te Ara – the Encyclopaedia of New Zealand, 
