



Cybelignan

CHARLES GABRIEL SELIGMAN

1873-1940

CHARLES GABRIEL SELIGMAN died from infective endocarditis in a nursing home at Oxford on 19 September 1940. He was born in London on 24 December 1873, the only child of Hermann and Olivia (*née* Mendez da Costa) Seligmann. (He dropped the last letter of his surname after 1914.) His interests in natural science became early manifest: while still at a preparatory school, he began to collect butterflies and, at the house of a boy friend, carried out chemical experiments. He then entered St Paul's School, but the education he received there was far from congenial to him. Lonely and unhappy at home, reserved and discontented at school, he would often play truant to satisfy his growing interests in animal and plant life, spending his time collecting, dissecting and reading. His mother, an invalid, would sometimes remove him from St Paul's to spend a term with her at a seaside resort. On these occasions he educated himself by reading widely in the local public library. When he was about sixteen years old he lost his father, and his mother died not long after. On her death an uncle, his guardian, arranged for him to be housed in a family of relatives between whom and himself unfortunately there existed little affection or sympathy. He formed friendships with far older men who encouraged him in his tastes, notably with the late F. M. Halford, an ardent amateur microscopist and the most distinguished dry-fly fisherman of his day.

Seligman left the 'science side' of St Paul's to 'coach' for matriculation, and in 1892 he gained an Entrance Scholarship at St Thomas's Hospital. Here in 1896 he obtained his first medical qualification and was awarded the Bristowe medal in pathology. Clinical medicine from the therapeutic or humanitarian standpoint had relatively little attraction for him, although he served

as house-physician in 1897; nor had he the manipulative skill to attract him to surgery. His earliest research work, published in 1896 and 1898, indicated two of the three broad lines of interest which were long to dominate him; they concerned tropical diseases—Madura foot and the hatching of *Bilharzia ova*—and abnormalities of bodily form—in fish. But a third interest was already developing, long to compete with and finally to eclipse both of these. During his last undergraduate years and while serving as house-physician at St Thomas's, he had begun to study the heredity of hair- and eye-colour among the families of fellow-students, nurses, etc. With this enquiry arose a fast-growing interest in (physical) anthropology.

This new interest, added to that in tropical pathology, induced him in 1897 to approach the late A. C. Haddon, F.R.S., who had by then just completed the personnel of his projected Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to the Torres Straits. Seligman showed such keenness in the objects of the expedition that he successfully persuaded Haddon to find room for him as an additional member of it. The expedition set out from England in April 1898; but with his characteristic thoroughness, Seligman decided to make an earlier start so as to gain some ethnological experience in North Queensland, where for several months he worked among two little-known tribes of the Cape York peninsula before joining the expedition on its arrival in the Torres Straits. It was as a member of it that he received his anthropological training at the hands of Haddon and Rivers—from the former in physical anthropology and ethnology, from the latter in certain aspects of social anthropology and in the application of the methods of experimental psychology in examining the senses of primitive peoples.

At first, in conformity with his earlier training and interests, Seligman occupied himself with the investigation of native diseases and abnormalities, and of native medicine, surgery and midwifery. But soon he began to make bodily measurements and to study magic and other native practices, ceremonies and beliefs. Indeed by the time the expedition visited New Guinea, he had

become so enthusiastic in ethnological research that he seriously considered acceptance of the offer of a medical post there, which would have given him the opportunity of prolonged field-work in this subject. He decided, however, to remain with the expedition, and accompanied it on its later visit to Sarawak in Borneo. His important contributions to its work are to be found in the six published volumes of the Reports of the expedition.

In 1899 Seligman returned to England, and in the same year was awarded a Salters' Company research fellowship in pathology at his old hospital. This was followed by his appointment in 1901 as superintendent of the clinical laboratory there. Meanwhile he had passed the examinations for the M.B. and the M.R.C.P. (London), and had published papers relating to diseases and abnormalities among the natives of New Guinea and on the physiological activity of a certain poison applied by the Sarawak natives to their darts, besides articles on various cases of medical and surgical disease which he was called on to investigate at the hospital laboratory. During this period he collaborated often with the late S. G. Shattock, F.R.S., with whom he published in the *Proceedings of the Royal Society* an important paper, now recognized as of pioneer character, on the development of secondary sexual characters in the male of the sheep and fowl, showing that they are dependent on an internal secretion of the testis. He investigated, too, congenital cretinism in Dexter-Kerry calves, discovering its invariable association with disease of the maternal placenta. His interests in problems of heredity and in bodily malformations and mental perversions, sexual in character, were at this period intense.

But the attractions of ethnological field-work were far from losing their hold on him. In 1903, during a fishing holiday, he chanced to meet a wealthy American man of business, the late Major Cook-Daniels, whom he persuaded in the following year to finance an expedition to New Guinea and to entrust him with its scientific leadership. It consisted of three members—Seligman, Cook-Daniels, and his former laboratory assistant, W. Mersh Strong. Not until 1910, however, was the abundant information

resulting from this expedition published by Seligman—in the first of the three elaborate volumes which he has left behind to attest the thoroughgoing character of his ethnological field-work in three widely distant parts of the world. This first volume, of nearly 800 pages, entitled *The Melanesians of British New Guinea*, definitely established his reputation as an anthropologist. It demonstrated, more fully than had before been possible, the striking cultural and physical differences between the Western Papuans of British New Guinea and their eastern neighbours who had been influenced by Melanesian immigration, and the less strongly marked differences between these latter 'Papu-Melanesians' and those occupying the extreme east of British New Guinea and the bordering archipelagos. These differences had been summarized in a long monograph contributed by Seligman in 1909 to the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, entitled 'A Classification of the Natives of British New Guinea'.

This first book of Seligman's attested also the breadth of his interests in different branches of ethnology, and his ability to recognize intuitively, during a comparatively brief visit, what was most worthy of observation and study. Later workers in the same field proved the accuracy and value of these pioneer investigations. The publication of the volume was delayed for several reasons, only some of which need be mentioned here. On his return from New Guinea to England in 1905, Seligman was appointed for three years pathologist to the Zoological Society of London, and he served as bacteriologist to a Royal Commission engaged in the investigation of grouse disease. He was also occupied in preparing three Hunterian lectures which in 1906 he delivered before the Royal College of Surgeons (England) on the physical anthropology and ethnology of British New Guinea. In the same year he took the M.D. examination of the University of London, at which he was awarded the gold medal of the University for his thesis 'On the Morbid Conditions met with among the Natives of British New Guinea: a Study in the Evolution of Disease'—a title which happily indicates the

integration of his pathological, anthropological and biological interests. He continued to collaborate with Shattock and others on such teratological and pathological problems as hermaphroditism in the domestic fowl and the relation (or rather the lack of relation) between human and avian tuberculosis. He also discovered a hitherto unknown species of protozoal parasite in the blood of a bird suffering from grouse disease.

In 1905 he married Brenda, sister of R. N. Salaman, F.R.S. With some previous training in zoology, she began to assist him in his pathological work. In the year following, through A. C. Haddon's influence, he received an invitation from the Government of Ceylon to carry out, at its expense, an ethnographic survey of the Veddas, an aboriginal tribe extremely shy and highly jealous of its womenfolk. In accepting this offer Seligman realized that he was now definitely embarking on the career of an ethnologist. His wife, henceforth closely associated with his field-work, accompanied him on his visit in 1907-1908. Under his tuition she became herself an accomplished ethnologist, able on this and later expeditions to visit (as had never been possible for any previous investigator of the Veddas) their encampments, women and children, and to observe rites and ceremonies among women which no male would have been permitted to witness. In 1911 the Seligmans jointly published their copiously illustrated volume on *The Veddas*, which must long remain the standard work on the history, organization, religion, magic, dances, songs, arts and crafts, and the physical anthropology, of this very primitive and interesting people. Its publication thus followed closely on that of Seligman's volume on the Melanesians of British New Guinea.

But by now they had begun to collaborate in a new geographical field of research. In the winter of 1908-1909 Seligman had spent a holiday with his wife in visiting Egypt for the first time. Here he began a study of prehistoric stone implements. (In the previous year he had contributed, with T. A. Joyce, a short essay 'On Prehistoric Objects in British New Guinea' to a volume presented to the veteran anthropologist, E. B. Tylor, F.R.S., in

celebration of his seventy-fifth birthday.) In the following winter the Seligmans first visited the Sudan, having received an invitation from the Sudan Government to initiate an ethnographic survey of the country, for which it provided the necessary funds. They resumed their anthropological work in the Sudan in 1911-1912, and again in 1921-1922. The first important outcome of these visits was a monograph published by Seligman in 1913 on *Some aspects of the Hamitic problem in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan*. In the same year he had already briefly dealt with this problem in his Arris and Gale lecture delivered before the Royal College of Surgeons (England). In this monograph, however, he treated the physical aspect of the problem in greater detail, and he embodied in it much cultural material collected by him and his wife, including also observations of many mediaeval Arabic and modern writers and references to ancient Egyptian records. The important conclusion which he reached was that underlying the present-day cultures of North-Eastern and East Africa, is to be found a stratum of Hamitic culture which bears a series of striking resemblances to that of Ancient Egypt. To a common Hamitic influence he attributed the closely parallel customs among these peoples relating, *inter alia*, to matrilineal descent, brother-and-sister royal marriages, totemism, the treatment of cattle and milk, the importance attached to the placenta, the belief in a heavenly god, the cult of the dead, the cult of divine kings responsible for the production of rain, and the burial of the dead body in the 'embryonic' posture.

During a holiday in Egypt early in 1914, Seligman visited various archaeological sites and collected a large number of flint implements from the high desert. The result of subsequent study of this material was published by him in 1921 in a monograph entitled *The older Palaeolithic Age of Egypt*, in which conclusions both of typological and of stratigraphical importance were drawn. During their visits to the Sudan, he and his wife had opportunities of studying the Nilotic Dinka and Shilluk, the Bari and Lotuko-speaking tribes, the Nuba of Southern Kordofan, the Hamitic Hadendoa and Beni Amer (Beja) tribes of the Red

Sea Province, and the Kababish, an Arab tribe living a nomadic life in Northern Kordofan. A highly interesting account of the Kababish was published by them in 1918 in *Harvard African Studies*, tracing their North Arabian origin, their progress up the Nile and their admixture in the Sudan with Beja and negroid elements. But the main results of the survey which they had undertaken for the Sudan Government did not appear until 1932 when they published their heavily documented and superbly illustrated volume, *The Pagan Tribes of the Nilotic Sudan*. This work, invaluable alike to the scientist and to the administrator, once again attested Seligman's amazingly wide interests and untiring energy, and the help that he was always successful in obtaining from anthropological colleagues, local officials and others. Besides dealing with problems of history, physical anthropology and language, it describes systematically (i) the regulations of public life, (ii) family life, marriage and kinship, (iii) religion, (iv) rain-making, (v) death and funeral ceremonies. Tribe by tribe, under these five heads much of the abundant harvest of material gleaned by them is here garnered. Justly may the authors of this book claim to have 'laid the foundations of a scientific study of the peoples of the Sudan'.

After 1910 Seligman wrote but one non-anthropological paper, published in collaboration with S. G. Shattock in 1914, showing that there is no relation between the spermatogenic function of the testicle and the seasonal assumption of the 'eclipse' plumage in the male of the wild duck. Largely as a sequel to the aforementioned volumes, he published numerous papers in anthropological, archaeological and geographical journals, and he contributed several important articles on ethnology to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and to Hastings's *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*. In 1910 he was appointed to a lectureship in ethnology in the University of London. In 1911 he received the fellowship of the Royal College of Physicians (London). In 1913 he became part-time professor of ethnology at the London School of Economics and Political Science, insisting on its part-time character so that he might be free, as he hoped, to undertake further

work in the field. And when opportunity arose for the foundation of a full-time chair in anthropology at the School, he insisted on retaining his part-time chair and on the appointment to the new professorship of his then promising pupil, Bronislaw Malinowski, whom he continued to support and of whose success he was always justly proud. Seligman was indeed always ready to impart his vast knowledge, scholarship and stimulating enthusiasm to his many pupils, several others of whom now occupy distinguished positions in the generation of anthropologists that followed his. Realizing too, no doubt, the tragic loneliness of his own early life, he helped them frequently in their private difficulties. Indeed he had become interested in the thoughts and acts of all people, whatever their occupation: to none may the motto be more aptly applied—*nihil humani alienum puto*.

In 1915 he served as president of Section H (Anthropology) of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, choosing as the subject of his presidential address the Early History of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. During the last Great War he received a commission in the Royal Army Medical Corps, but his health precluded service overseas. He was attached during the years 1918–1919 to the Maghull Hospital which specialized in the treatment of the psycho-neuroses of warfare and in the instruction of medical officers in this treatment. This experience gave him a new outlook on anthropological problems—the possibility of a psychological and psycho-analytic approach to the study of the folklore, myths, dreams and symbolism of primitive (and advanced) peoples, and the possibility of detecting in their social life and in their normal and abnormal individual mental life (including mystical and other ‘dissociation’ states) the various phases of sexual development as conceived by Freud and the various mental types according to their classification by Jung. Ultimately he regarded the cruder aspects of these psycho-analytic views with the critical caution they demanded. Thus it came about that he devoted the first of his two presidential addresses to the Royal Anthropological Institute—he served as its president during the years 1923–1925, during the first of which

he was incapacitated by illness—to the relations of anthropology and psychology, and that he chose as the title of the Huxley Memorial lecture, which he delivered before the same Institute in 1932, *Anthropological perspective and psychological theory*. He had come to the conclusion that similarities in 'the unconscious' throughout mankind might help to account for similarities in belief and culture-pattern among peoples widely distant from one another. Not that he dissented from the use of the principle of culture-contact: indeed he was led by his researches and wide reading in archaeology to recognize its far-reaching influence, particularly in the early civilizations of Europe, India and China. But he rejected Elliot-Smith's extreme views of its all-sufficiency and of its geographically simple mode of action. He believed that there were many cases of similarity in belief and culture-pattern for which culture-contact, borrowing, a common path of evolution in conscious processes, or a common environment could not account.

Seligman worked hard to improve the status of the Royal Anthropological Institute. In 1925 he received from this Institute the Rivers medal. In 1933 he was appointed to give the Frazer lecture which he devoted to a study of divine kingship in Egypt and Negro Africa. In 1930 he published in the Home University Series a useful little volume, entitled *Races of Africa*, a revised edition of which appeared in 1939.

He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1919. He became also a corresponding member of the Società Antropologica of Rome, of the Anthropologische Gesellschaft of Vienna, and of the Polynesian Society. In 1931 he received the Annandale Memorial medal from the Asiatic Society of Bengal.

For many years before his death Seligman had not enjoyed robust health: his boundless energy and prolific output were often restrained or interrupted by periods of illness, sometimes prolonged, especially after his last visit to the Sudan. In 1934 increasing ill-health caused him to resign his professorship in the University of London which thereupon bestowed on him the title of 'professor emeritus'. On his sixtieth birthday he was presented

with a volume of thirty essays, written by some of his grateful pupils and admiring colleagues, as a token (to quote the words of the Preface to the book) of 'their profound indebtedness for the intellectual stimulus and personal kindness which he gives to all those who work with him'.

In 1929-1930 Seligman and his wife had the opportunity, long desired by them, of visiting China and Japan. Through her, soon after their marriage, he had taken up, at first merely as an aesthetic hobby, the collection of Chinese art-porcelain, etc. Later he built a small museum to house them in his home near Oxford. For some time he had been considering an archaeological and ethnological problem suggested to him by certain early Chinese glass and glazed beads. On this he began serious work during his visit to China and after his return. With H. C. Beck he communicated two papers on the subject to meetings of the Congress of Pre-historic and Proto-historic Sciences held in London in 1932 and in Oslo in 1936. In 1938 these collaborators published a beautifully illustrated monograph, entitled *Far Eastern glass: some Western origins*. In it are given the results of gravimetric, spectrographic and microscopic analyses of various objects. Its authors conclude that, along with the cultural wave that introduced iron into China from the West, glass vessels and beads reached that country across the Steppes and Siberia in sufficient numbers to be admired and to be (not servilely) copied in Chinese material, which differs chemically (especially by the presence of barium) from that used in the West. In 1935 Seligman had delivered the Lloyd Roberts lecture on the same subject before the Royal College of Physicians (London); this he published in 1937 under the title *The Roman Orient and the Far East*. Here he indicated other early contacts between Europe (via Egypt and Syria) and China, and he alluded to papers, which he had published in 1920 and 1928 on bird chariots and socketed celts found both in Europe and in China, in which he suggested that these Chinese objects were derived from European prototypes of the Bronze Age. In 1938 Seligman received and accepted an invitation to go to Yale University as visiting professor, where he lectured for six months.

Seligman was *par excellence* a field-worker. As such he stands unrivalled in the breadth of his interests, in his thoroughness, integrity and energy, and in his wide knowledge, both practical and theoretical, of the many branches of his subject. Indeed it is safe to say that no previous ethnologist has ever amassed so much fresh information from so many different regions of the world in so many different branches of ethnology, and that with the present and future increasing specialization of the subject no ethnologist will in this last respect surpass him. His early biological and medical education always stood him in good stead: he approached ethnology, to its advantage, from a broad biological standpoint, and he investigated every problem that confronted him by systematic methods akin to those employed by the physician or surgeon in arriving at a diagnosis. Owing to his single-minded, unselfish devotion to the pursuit of knowledge, Seligman had among his scientific colleagues a wide circle of friends who were always ready to place their information at his disposal and to help on his work by their active co-operation.

He had little love—nor perhaps talent—for far-flung speculations. He assumed the more urgent task of collecting fast-perishing ethnological and sociological material from primitive peoples who are fast being affected, culturally and economically, by advancing 'civilization'. Nevertheless he realized—and in his teaching he insisted—that the progress of ethnology depends not merely on the collection of 'facts' but also on their comparison and interpretation and on the study of their determining conditions. He realized, too, that his own contributions were, in a large measure, but heavy spade-work that needed a more refined re-digging only obtainable by a far longer sojourn among the people visited, by a correspondingly thorough familiarity with their language, and by so close an intimacy with them and their social environment that the ethnologist could readily enter into their minds and, when occasion demanded, could himself almost feel and think as they did.

The misfortune of others always made a strong appeal to him. His balanced judgment, terse bluntness and robust common sense

rendered him a valuable member of a committee that was concerned during his last years with aiding foreign refugees of academic standing driven from their country through religious and racial persecution. Throughout his married life he was heroically and ably helped by his wife, without whose insight, sympathy and encouragement his contributions to ethnology would have been very different. Theirs was a partnership not only maritally, but also scientifically, perfect. She bore him two children—a daughter of unusual attraction and promise who to their lasting sorrow died in childhood, and a son who survives him.

I wish to acknowledge the help which I have received from Mr S. L. Bensusan, Dr T. S. Good, Dr H. C. Jonas and Dr R. N. Salaman, from Mrs Mair and especially from Mrs Seligman, among others, in the preparation of this notice. The bibliography appended is based on one which was compiled up to the year 1934 by the editors of the volume of presentation essays and published in that volume. It has been completed through the kind assistance of Miss Phyllis Puckle.

C. S. MYERS

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