

C. G. Seligman: 'Sligs'

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Charles Gabriel Seligman was born in 1873, the only son of a prosperous London wine merchant, Hermann Seligman. His mother, Olivia Mendez da Costa, was the descendant of a distinguished Sephardi English family. One of her direct ancestors, Emanuel Mendez da Costa became a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1747, and later served as its Secretary. He was only the second Jewish fellow of the Royal Society.

Seligman was educated at St Paul's School, where he was rather miserable and unstimulated. His mother periodically pulled him out of school to stay with her at seaside resorts when she was ill. His parents died young. At the age of sixteen he was orphaned and farmed out to distant relatives with whom he did not get on. Coached privately for matriculation, he won an entrance scholarship to St. Thomas's Hospital. There he specialised in pathology, winning his membership – and the Bristowe Medal for Pathology – in 1896. He now began a research career in pathology. And yet when the Torres Strait expedition was planned he inveigled a place in it for himself. In 1898, two years after qualifying in pathology, he set off with a team of Cambridge scientists to investigate the peoples who lived on the scattered islands between Australia and New Guinea.

This decision by a young pathologist to make a detour to the far reaches of the Pacific was not as strange as it might seem. The leading members of the new generation of ethnologists who succeeded Frazer and Tylor were followers of Darwin and Huxley, and had a professional training in biology. The participants in the Torres Strait expedition were almost all medical men or human biologists – Haddon, Rivers, McDougall, and Seligman and his close friend C. S. Myers. Although Haddon and Rivers did some pioneering sociological research, much of

the work in the Torres Strait was on physical anthropology and psychological dispositions. Seligman's main research topic was the pathology of the islanders, but he also studied local medical practice and beliefs, examined the native use of plants and animals, and he assisted Rivers in some of his psychological experiments, which represented the first application of modern experimental psychology to what were termed 'primitive' subjects. And he even encroached on Haddon's field of ethnology.

Seligman became so keen on anthropology that he thought about taking up a medical post in Port Moresby. For the moment, he returned to London and his researches in pathology. His hobby was fly-fishing, and on a fishing holiday he made friends with a rich American, Major Cooke Daniels, and got him interested in New Guinea. In 1904 the Major, Seligman, and Seligman's laboratory assistant went off to New Guinea where Seligman carried out research which he wrote up at his leisure in the next few years and published in 1910 as *The Melanesians of British New Guinea*. He concluded that the aboriginal Papuans had been infiltrated by immigrants who spoke Melanesian, and that the pure Papuans were physically more primitive and culturally more backward than the Papuan-Melanesians. His study never enjoyed the influence of Rivers' *History of Melanesian Society*, published in 1914, but it justified his appointment at the LSE.

In 1905 Seligman had married Brenda Zara Salaman, the youngest of fourteen children. Her father was a wealthy city figure, and her brother, Seligman's friend Redcliffe, became an FRS and was to be famous for his scientific history of the potato. Brenda was educated at Rodean School and Bedford College, but dropped out to marry Seligman, and she now joined him as a co-fieldworker and soon began to publish anthropological essays in her own right. Together they carried out successful field expeditions to the Veddas of Ceylon and to the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, in both cases financed by the colonial governments.

Haddon had advised Seligman to take on the Vedda because he favoured the study of the supposedly most primitive and soon-to-vanish hunter gatherers. In Ceylon the couple instituted a division of labour: Seligman said he left 'the social stuff' to Brenda. He focused particularly on pre-history, material culture, and biology. However, the main interest of their Vedda book today is perhaps the account they give of the difficulty of doing research.

"The Veddas have long been regarded as a curiosity in Ceylon and excite almost as much interest as the ruined cities, hence Europeans go to the nearest Rest House on the main road and have the Danigala Veddas brought to them. Naturally the Veddas felt uncomfortable and shy at first, but when they found that they had only to look gruff and grunt replies in order to receive presents they were quite clever enough to keep up the pose. In this they were aided by the always agreeable villagers ever ready to give the white man exactly what he wanted. ... The Nilgala headman sends word when strangers are expected, then the Veddas repair to their very striking hut on the rock dome and often post a look-out on a big rock about half way up These folk, who when we saw them wore their Vedda loin cloths and were smeared with ashes, are reported to wear ordinary Sinhalese clothes when not in their professional pose. ... Indeed it appeared that not only have members of this community learnt to play the

part of professional primitive man, but there has even been specialisation, for as far as we could learn, the men we met at the look-out hut are those who always receive visitors or come to Bibile when sent for, while the others whom we did not see do not pose as wild Veddas [1].”

In consequence, Seligman concluded, the people made terrible informants. ‘Further talk with these people showed that it was impossible to obtain reliable information from them, they had been utterly spoilt as the result of being frequently interviewed by travellers. [2]’

By 1910, when he joined the LSE, Seligman had abandoned pathology for ethnology, but when World War 1 broke out he was commissioned in the Royal Army Medical Corps. He also patriotically altered the spelling of his name. Originally Seligmann was spelt with two final nn’s. He dropped one, which provoked Malinowski to joke, ‘How typical of Sligs to do things by halves!’. In the years 1918-19 Seligman was attached to the Maghull Hospital in Liverpool which specialized in the treatment of what Myers had called ‘shell-shock’. It would now be termed post-traumatic stress disorder. At Maghull Seligman joined colleagues from the Torres Straits expedition, Rivers, Myers and McDougall. Their clinical experiences stimulated an interest in psychoanalytical theories and in particular in dreams. Rivers published a revisionist book on dreams, and Seligman directed his students in the field – including Malinowski – to read Freud and Jung and to collect dreams. After the war he urged anthropologists to borrow ideas from the psychoanalysts, and argued that common unconscious processes underlay rituals throughout the world.

After the war, Seligman picked up on field research he had already begun in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. And this time he was inspired by a new twist of diffusionist theory. Following the dramatic findings of Flinders Petrie at UCL, most famously the excavation of the tomb of Tutenkhamun, anthropologists had become fascinated by Egypt. Rivers had paid a visit and done some research of his own on the colour vision of peasants engaged in Petrie’s excavations. And Petrie’s colleague at UCL, the anatomist and pioneer physical anthropologist, Grafton Elliot Smith, had begun to develop the thesis that all civilization spread originally from the Egyptian model.

The Seligmans visited Cairo and spent several months in the Sudan, making three expeditions between 1909 and 1922. In 1913, Seligman published a monograph in which he launched his once famous, now notorious, ‘Hamitic’ theory, which proposed that the civilizations of the Sudan had been introduced from Egypt by a light-skinned race of conquerors. ‘... features common to the social life and religion of ancient Egypt and tropical Negro-land’ were due to ‘the infiltration of the latter with the ideas of that great White Race of which the pre-dynastic Egyptians constitute the oldest known as well as one of the purest branches.’ ‘The history of Africa South of the Sahara is no more than the story of the permeation through the ages in different degrees and at various times, of the Negro and Bushman aborigines by Hamitic blood and culture. The Hamites were, in fact, the great civilizing force of black Africa. [3]’ This racial, diffusionist theory was later generalized and popularized in his *Races of Africa*, published in 1930. Inspired by Frazer, he also identified the institution of ‘divine kingship’ among the Shilluk, but, of course, he gave it a Hamitic origin.

In 1932 the Seligmans published *The Pagan Tribes of the Nilotic Sudan*, which provided the background for the next generation of modernist ethnographies of the southern Sudan, above all the work of Seligman's other great protégé, Edward Evans-Pritchard, who was much more loyal than Malinowski.

And here is another forgotten piece of history. We tend to think that Malinowski's seminar in the 1930s formed modern British social anthropology, but Malinowski and Seligman operated a 'gentleman's agreement' on the supervision of students. 'Social anthropology' students were supervised by Malinowski, those more interested in ethnology and prehistory went to Seligman. And it was Seligman, not Malinowski, who supervised the theses of the first Africanists produced in the LSE, Evans-Pritchard, Isaac Schapera, and Jack Driberg, and he later steered Nadel to the Sudan. Schapera's first idea for a doctoral thesis was to build on Seligman's account of divine kingship among the Shilluk, and Evans-Pritchard later wrote a famous essay on the institution. Both Evans-Pritchard and Schapera remained faithful to Seligman's legacy. Late in his career Evans-Pritchard began to promote diffusionism, and he and Schapera made an ill-advised effort to update Seligman's *Races of Africa*. The American Africanist and diffusionist, Melville Herskovits, was another admirer.

Evans-Pritchard and Schapera also took Seligman's side against Malinowski in the early 1930s when Malinowski talked the Rockefeller foundation into funding research at the LSE in Africa. Malinowski insisted on taking control of the new cadre of Africanist students, which included Meyer Fortes, Audrey Richards, Lucy Mair and Hilda Kuper. He marginalized Seligman, who was after all then one of the leading Africanists in the world. This may have contributed to Seligman's decision to resign his professorship in 1934, although he was also suffering ill-health, evidently having picked up some infection in the Sudan. In 1938 he taught at Yale for six months, and I would bet that Yale's fateful invitation to Malinowski the following year was urged on them by the loyal Seligman.

After his retirement Sligs and Brenda concentrated on another of their avocations, the collection of Chinese and Japanese porcelain. They made a six-month tour of China and Japan in 1929, and set up a small private museum in their home at Court Leys, near Oxford to house their collection. Seligman even developed and published a theory that glass and beads were introduced to China from the West, a diffusion that in time had led to the development of new methods of producing porcelain.

Gruff and rather awkward socially, Seligman was devoted to Brenda, who had better social skills, and their home near Oxford, with its famous iris garden, and its collection of far eastern artifacts, attracted connoisseurs and visiting anthropologists over three decades. He had enduring friendships with his early colleagues and his students, and no enemies.

A member of the pioneer generation of British anthropology, Seligman - like his mentors Haddon and Rivers - had come into the field from biology. Like Rivers again, he insisted always on the importance of physiology and psychological theories in ethnological research. Following Rivers, he became a diffusionist. And like Rivers he was passionate about

fieldwork – it was Seligman who made the famous comment that field research in anthropology is what the blood of the martyrs is to the church. He participated in the foundational expedition of the British ethnographic fieldwork, the Torres Straits expedition of 1898, under the leadership of Haddon and Rivers. But, of course, his fieldwork was in the early Rivers mould of broad surveys, very different from the Malinowskian model of the next generation.

Whatever there is to be said about Seligman, and I have only skimmed the surface here, I suppose that, at least from the point of view of LSE anthropology, the key feature of his biography is his difficult but productive relationship with Malinowski.

So completely is LSE anthropology associated with Malinowski that we have lost sight of its pre-history. We forget the relationship between early anthropology at the School and the first LSE sociologists, Hobhouse, Ginsberg, and, more particularly, the Swedish Finn, Edward Westermarck, who wrote the one truly Darwinian study of the development of marriage and did significant field research in Morocco. And the true founder of LSE anthropology, ‘Sligs’ Seligman, has been forgotten.

Indeed, the most important landmark in the history of anthropology at the LSE has been mislaid. Today we should be celebrating not only Seligman but the centenary of anthropology at the LSE. Haddon had given occasional lectures in anthropology in London since 1904, but it was precisely a century ago, in 1910, that the LSE established its first post in the field, and appointed Seligman as University Lecturer in Ethnology. The following year the School decided to set up a bachelor’s programme in anthropology. In 1913 Seligman’s post was transformed into a part-time chair (part-time, on Seligman’s insistence, in order to allow time for fieldwork).

And it was also in 1910 that Malinowski turned up at the School as a post-doctoral student. Of course, it was Malinowski who later made the LSE a world centre of anthropology, but it was Seligman who guided Malinowski’s early career and smoothed his way at the School. In his splendid biography of Malinowski, Michael Young writes:

“Seligmann did for anthropology in London what Haddon did for the discipline at Cambridge, including the teaching of missionaries and colonial officers. But one of the factors that made their otherwise comparable careers distinct was the unpredictable person of Malinowski himself. While Haddon nurtured many academic progeny, none had the disruptive potential and paradigm-shifting genius of Malinowski, Seligmann’s protégé. The fundamental English decency of both men was often taxed by the volatile Pole, and Haddon was doubtless relieved that Malinowski remained at arm’s length in London [4].”

In 1911 Malinowski was planning to follow Seligman into the Sudan, even learning Arabic, and Seligman did his best to get a grant for him from the LSE. This was turned down, the School secretary commenting that having created Seligman’s lectureship, and agreeing to the establishment of a bachelor’s degree in the discipline, “They felt they had rather

exhausted themselves over Ethnology'. But Seligman persisted. He steered Malinowski to his earlier field area, in Melanesia, raised grants for him, and even went shopping with Malinowski at Lan & Adler ('Home and Colonial Supplies'). At six guineas the most expensive item they bought was a tent, but when Malinowski got to the Trobriands it turned out to be too small, and he had to buy another, the one that features in the famous photograph.

And when the School established a chair in the discipline, the first in London University, in 1927, Seligman made sure that it was Malinowski who was appointed to it. But on Malinowski's request the post was designated in 'social anthropology'. This signalled his impending break with the tradition represented by Seligman, for they had very different views of the subject. *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* is dedicated to Seligman, but Seligman himself preferred 'Baloma'.

Malinowski's biographer Michael Young sums up the relationship between the two men very well:

"Only eleven years older than Malinowski, Seligman was more a supportive elder brother than a father-figure. Plagued by ill-health, the two men formed a collegial bond of suffering which they nourished by the exchange of bulletins on their latest symptoms. [There are 300 letters between them in the LSE archive] that document the ups and downs of a personal and professional relationship spanning almost thirty years. They quarrelled occasionally ... but until the very end there remained a deep undercurrent of mutual affection ... it was Seligman who urged upon [Malinowski] the crucial importance of field research ...; it was Seligman who found the funding for his research in New Guinea,; it was Seligman's bureaucratic persistence that gained him his doctor of science degree; and it was largely thanks to Seligman that he secured his appointment to and promotions at the London School of Economics [5]."

Without Seligman, Malinowski's career would not have flourished as it did, perhaps not even surviving the difficult early years after World War I. And certainly without Seligman's groundwork, and his nurturing of Malinowski, the LSE would not have become the great centre of social anthropology in the 1930s.

Further reading:

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C. S. Myers, 'Charles Gabriel Seligman', *Obituary Notices of Fellows of the Royal Society*, 1941, vol.3, no. 10, pp. 626-646.

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[1] C. Seligman and Brenda Seligman, *The Veddas* (1911), p. 39-40.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 39.

[3] « Some Aspects of the Hamitic Problem in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan », *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, vol. 43, p. 593-705.

[4] Michael W. Young, *Malinowski: Odyssey of an Anthropologist 1884-1920*, 2004, New Haven, London, Yale University Press.

[5] *Ibid.*