

A Desire for Social Justice: Life and Work of Ralph O'Reilly Piddington

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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.

[1] Kenneth Maddock, ‘Affinities and Missed Opportunities: John Anderson and A.R. Radcliffe-Brown in Sydney’. *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*, Vol. 3 (1-2), 1992, 3-18; Jeremy Beckett, ‘W.E.H. Stanner and A.R. Radcliffe-Brown’, *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Social and Cultural Practice*. 17, 1985, 126-129.

[2] Jeremy Beckett and Geoffrey Gray, ‘Hogbin, Herbert Ian Priestley (1904–1989)’, Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/hogbin-herbert-ian-priestley-12644/text22783>

[3] D. J. Mulvaney, ‘Warner, William Lloyd (1898–1970)’, Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/warner-william-lloyd-8987/text15819>

[4] Ronald Cohen, ‘Charles William Merton Hart, 1905-1976’, *American Anthropologist* (New Series), vol. 79 (1), 1977, 11-112.

[5] D. J. Mulvaney, 'Stanner, William Edward (Bill) (1905–1981)', Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/stanner-william-edward-bill-15541/text26753>

[6] <https://www.anu.edu.au/linguistics/nash/aust/laves/obituary.html>

[7] Piddington to C.W.M Hart, 31 March 1955. Private Collection. Phyllis Kaberry (BA 1933) and Donald F Thomson (Dep. Anthropology, 1928) appear to be on the edge of this group. Camilla Wedgwood was a lecturer in the department. See Christine Cheater, 'Kaberry, Phyllis Mary (1910–1977)', Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/kaberry-phyllis-mary-10654/text18933>; Howard Morphy, 'Thomson, Donald Finlay Fergusson (1901–1970)', Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/thomson-donald-finlay-fergusson-11851/text21213>; David Wetherell, 'Wedgwood, Camilla Hildegard (1901–1955)', Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/wedgwood-camilla-hildegard-11992/text21503>

[8] Michael Roe, 'Piddington, Albert Bathurst (1862–1945)', Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/piddington-albert-bathurst-8043/text14027>; Ann Curthoys, 'Piddington, Marion Louisa (1869–1950)', Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/piddington-marion-louisa-8044/text14029>

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

[10] Marjorie Piddington and Ralph Piddington, 'Report of Fieldwork in North-western Australia', *Oceania*, Vol. II (3), 1932, 342–58.

[11] They married on 23 February 1929, in Sydney.

[12] Geoffrey Gray, 'a tribune anthropologist appears?': Gerhardt Laves, Ralph Piddington and Marjorie Piddington, La Grange Bay, 1930', *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, 2006/1: 23–35.

[13] His most well-known publication is *Temperament and Race*, published in 1926, is general regarded a racist volume. See <http://ferris-pages.org/ISAR/bios/Porteus/stannard.htm>

[14] Radcliffe-Brown to Gibson, Hon Sec ANRC, 21 May 1930. Elkin Papers, University of Sydney Archives, EP. 155/4/1/9. Advertisement sent to University Registrars by the ANRC, 26 May 1930. 155/4/1/9.

[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.

[16] Pat Jacobs, *Mr. Neville; a biography*. Fremantle Arts Press, 1990, 226. Cf. Geoffrey Gray, 'Piddington's Indiscretion':† Ralph Piddington, 'The Australian National Research Council and Academic Freedom'. *Oceania*, Vol. 64 (3), 1994, 217-245. for a detailed discussion and copies of the reports.

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

[18] Dorothy K. Billings, pers. comm. 8 August 2003.

[19] See correspondence between Hart and Piddington. Private Collection.

[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, Nirmbdi, was Piddington's other main informant. See also *An Introduction to Social Anthropology*, vol. 1, 1950, 76-105.

[21] <http://libraryblogs.is.ed.ac.uk/godfreythomsonproject/tag/john-carl-flugel/>

[22] Firth to Malinowski, 7 July 1937. Archive of Sir Raymond Firth, British Library of Political and Economic Science, London School of Economics. FIRTH 8/1/96.

[23] Piddington to Firth, 4 March 1939. FIRTH8/2/6. 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.

[24] <http://www.queensu.ca/encyclopedia/f/fyfe-sir-william-hamilton>

[25] Report in *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, copy attached Piddington to Firth, 28 October 1938, FIRTH 8/1/96.

[26] Graeme Sligo, *Backroom Boys*, Blue Sky Publishing, 2012.

[27] Molony, *Nyerere*, 2014, 164.

[28] Bruce Biggs, Obituary, *Proceedings of the Royal Society of New Zealand*, Vol. 103, 127.

[29] Tigger Wise, 'Elkin, Adolphus Peter (1891–1979)', Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/elkin-adolphus-peter-10109/text17845>

[30] Gray, Piddington's indiscretion, 1994.

[31] Hogbin to A.P. Elkin, 2 February 1946; 28 February 1946. EP 160/4/1/79.

- [32] Michael Jackson, *Between One and One Another*, University of California Press, 2012, 110-115
- [33] J.F. Foster, secretary of the Commonwealth Association of Universities, Letter to Registrar, Auckland University College, 16 May. Attached to Minutes of Council, Auckland University College, 9 June 1949, University of Auckland Archives.
- [34] Jackson, *Between One*, 2012.110-115.
- [35] Pers. Comm. August 2003.
- [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.
- [38] Steven Webster, *Patrons of Maori Culture: Power, Theory and Ideology in the Maori Renaissance*. Dunedin: University of Otago Press. 1998, 105.
- [39] Christine Helliwell, Ralph Bulmer 1928–1988, *Canberra Anthropology*, vol. 11(1), 1988, 129-131, DOI: 10.1080/03149098809508518
- [40] Ralph Bulmer 1979. Joan Metge, Research Notes re Professor Ralph Piddington, MSS and Archives Vault 148, Special Collections, University of Auckland Library.
- [41] Jackson, *One Other*, 2012, 110-115.
- [42] Bulmer, Opening, 1979. Joan Metge, Research Notes re Professor Ralph Piddington, MSS and Archives Vault 148, Special Collections, University of Auckland Library.
- [43] Ralph Piddington, 'Emergent Development and Integration', in Erik Schwimmer (ed.), *Maori People in the Nineteen Sixties*. Blackwood, 1968, 257-269. Dan Morrow. 2013, 185. Also Steven Webster, *Patrons of Maori Culture: Power, Theory, and Ideology in the Maori Renaissance*. Otago University Press, 1998, 103-123. Daniel Morrow & Barbara Brookes (2013) 'The Politics of Knowledge: Anthropology and Māori Modernity in Mid-Twentieth-Century', *New Zealand, History and Anthropology*, 24 (4), (2013) 453-471, DOI: 10.1080/02757206.2013.809346
- [44] Joan Metge. 'Piddington, Ralph O'Reilly', Dictionary of New Zealand Biography, first published in 2000. Te Ara - the Encyclopaedia of New Zealand, <https://teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/5p28/piddington-ralph-oreilly> (accessed 18 February 2018)
- [45] Bulmer, Opening, 1979.
- [46] Metge, op. cit.