

BYWAYS IN OXFORD ANTHROPOLOGY

Selections from the Minutes of the
Oxford University Anthropological Society

On February 18, 1917 the Anthropological Society celebrated its hundredth meeting with a paper by Miss Pollard on 'The European Witch Mania'. From its foundation the Society had put on a varied programme which included folk-lore, ancient history, archaeology and physical anthropology. In 1917 the Society began to provide a brief description of the content of the talks which gives us an insight into the concerns of the era. Of particular interest is an interpretation of Areil Bread (funeral biscuits) which was delivered by G. Sidney Hartland on November 1, 1917.

The speaker took as his text a paper envelope which had contained a funeral biscuit. This and similar envelopes had been distributed at the funeral of Mr. Oliver who died on November 7, 1828. Mr. Hartland brought forward evidence to show that these funeral feasts were probably relics of a very ancient custom in various parts of the world of eating the flesh of the dead tribesmen.



However, not all the descriptions of talks are as full as they might be, as is shown by the following account for October 17, 1918.

Dr. Schiller then read his presidential address entitled 'Anthropology and Psychical Research'. There was no discussion.

The details of the minutes give a picture of flamboyance in the Society of this period and a talk by Mrs. Murgoe illustrates this well. On May 15, 1918 she gave a paper about 'Peasant Customs and Beliefs in Roumania', where lantern slides were shown and a dance was performed by a Miss Romalo in 'native costume'. The Society had gone to the trouble of inviting six Roumanian officers who were training in Oxford, and were impressed when one of the officers leapt up and executed a *pas seul* at the end of the talk.

The problem of subscription arrears bothered committee meetings from the start of the Society when the membership was 2/6d per annum. In 1918 the committee decided to clamp down when they introduced a rule to penalize offenders. They even sent round carefully printed reminders informing members that if they were one term in arrears it would be assumed that they had left the Society. Perhaps this type of policy was responsible for keeping the Society in funds. For example, on November 15, 1915 there was a surplus of £15 which the committee decided to invest. The Society also bought War Stock during World War I and in 1917 the treasurer found that the Society could not afford to buy a box large enough to contain all its War Loan receipts. The Society is indeed still benefiting from these shrewd investments and in the first half of 1980 it received a total of 60 pence from its War Stock.

MIKE HITCHCOCK
Secretary, 1979-80
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