Beatrice Blackwood

Nominated by Marcus Banks, Professor of Visual Anthropology

Beatrice Blackwood. Copyright Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford. 1998.442.105.

Beatrice Blackwood was one of the UK's pioneering women anthropologists, studying anthropology at Oxford in 1916-18, after following the undergraduate degree syllabus in English. Women were not allowed to matriculate or graduate from Oxford until 1920, at which point Beatrice supplicated for (that is, asked the University to grant) her BA and MA degrees; however, Beatrice was associated with Oxford – and the Pitt Rivers Museum – for most of the twentieth century. Anthropology in the early twentieth century included the study of human anatomy (on the misguided assumption that there were anatomical differences between human 'races') and in the early decades Beatrice taught human anatomy and physical anthropology. However, by the 1920s Beatrice was firmly entrenched in social anthropological study, making field trips to North America to study Native American and other minority communities, to the Solomon Islands in the Pacific, and to New Guinea. In 1938 she was appointed co-director of the Pitt Rivers Museum, for which she collected many artefacts in the Solomons and New Guinea, and from which she only retired in 1959. She was also a lecturer in 'ethnology' (a now outdated term for the study of the material culture of a people) from the late 1920s.

Beatrice was what we now call an 'engaged' anthropologist. She was outraged at the racial discrimination she encountered in the American South in the 1920s, and although she continued to use the term 'race' in her teaching she was adamant that this referred solely to physical differences, not cultural differences.

Today, this kind of thinking is much more nuanced (scientifically, there is no such thing as biological 'race' among humans, but there certainly is a 'folk' understanding of race, which leads to racism – discrimination on the basis of physical appearance and presumed cultural attributes).

However, Beatrice was a real pioneer in her use of moving picture technology. Like her close contemporary, Ursula Graham Bower (who conducted field research in Nagaland, in Northeast India in the 1930s), Beatrice was one of the first anthropologists to explore the documentary potential of film. Her 1936-37 film Kukukuku: a stone age people in New Guinea focuses on material culture (the subject matter of her academic discipline of 'ethnology') rather than lived experience. The film is of course silent, but nonetheless there is a humanity in the images that Beatrice captured. The Pitt Rivers Museum also owns a very arresting photograph – presumably taken by Beatrice herself - taken at about this time of the New Guinea Highlanders she worked with enjoying playing with her cat Sally. The cat sits on the shoulder of a Highlander while his friends or age mates look on.

Beatrice never married, although she shared a house in Oxford until 1963 with a long term companion. Her work has recently been revisited by Oxford anthropologists Laura Peers and Alison Brown (now at National Museums of Scotland) who took her 192 photographs of Kainai ("Blackfoot") Native American people back to the Kainai nation in Alberta. This project is now regarded as a pioneering work in seeking to reconnect 'source communities' with visual and material collections held in ethnographic museums around the world.

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