

BYWAYS IN OXFORD ANTHROPOLOGY

Selections from the Minutes of the
Oxford University Anthropological Society

1909: The Magic Lantern and the 'Messrs.' of Oriel and Lincoln

The Oxford University Anthropological Society was founded in 1909. The first page of the earliest minute book opens in the following manner:

Historical Note [sic]. The idea of founding an Anthropological Society which has been simmering in Oxford for many years, took definite shape during the Christmas Vacation of 1908-1909 in the minds of Mr.R.R. Marett, M.A. and Mr.G.C. Robson of New College. Not only were their views independently conceived, but they were so far different that whereas Mr. Marett's project was for a general Anthropological Society (upon the lines of the University Diploma for that Science), Mr. Robson more directly contemplated Field Work of an archaeological kind in the neighbourhood of Oxford along with the considerations of such problems as would therewith arise. However, having become aware of one another's designs through the common proselytising of Mr.A. Montgomerie Bill, they decided to make common cause; and the programme of the new Society was circulated in the first week of Hilary Term 1909; and the Society formally constituted at a meeting held in Exeter College Old Bursary on Thursday, January 29th, 1909.

At this meeting Marett (later President of the Society) took a shaping role and proposed Prof.E.B. Tylor as Acting President, Mr.H. Balfour as Acting Vice-President and Mr.G.C. Robson as Secretary. Mr.J.A. Hampton was proposed as Treasurer by Robson, but he later refused the post, and the Hon.P.A. Methuen was proposed in his place. The annual subscription was agreed upon at 2/6 per annum.

In deference to Robson's particular interests, a field section was formed and time was allotted at meetings for it to present its finds. One detects a hint of anomaly in its position: every time the field section asked for funds in 1909, a decision was postponed to the next meeting. It had a shadowy presence and it is noted on February 26th that 'the Acting President and Secretary made statements with regard to the field section'.

Possibly the field section was playing a hidden role because on May 11th the Secretary was instructed to send round notice 'of the need for members interested in the Bronze Age to announce themselves'.

Equally elusive were the college secretaries. On June 1st it was decided to have secretaries in colleges for recruitment and publicity. Only after their election was it discovered that three of them had already left Oxford. The secretaries from Oriel and Lincoln were so discreet as to have no recorded names except 'Mr.'

An 'extraordinary' meeting of the Society took place on May 10th. Mr. W. McClintock gave a paper on 'The Blackfoot Indians of the Rocky Mountains (with Lantern Demonstration)'. No account is given of the content of the talk or discussion; it is clear however that this was the first time a lantern had been used. Obviously this set a trend because a further three talks that year out of a total of nine were illustrated by lantern slides. There was no innovation in reporting the content. In the following years, the lantern seems to have been in constant use, under the supervision of an official operator. In 1916 the tired lantern finally broke down.

Lectures were often illustrated by specimens and, at a talk by Marett on October 22nd, '... a number of Bull Roarers were exhibited and practical illustrations of their use were given'.



22 October 1909: Mr. Marett Demonstrating his Bull Roarer

The enthusiasm of the Society can be seen from the length of the meetings which began at 8.30pm and often lasted until after 11pm. The year 1909, in which the style of the nascent Society became set, ended with a paper by Mr. Halliday entitled 'The Psychological Basis of' [sic].

The wide range of interests supported by the Society's members is indicated by the full list of talks for the inaugural year 1909:

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| February 23 | Prof.E.B. Tylor on 'Archaeological Work on the Zambesi' |
| February 26 | Mr. A.R. Brown on 'A Prehistoric Religion (Andamanese)' |
| March 5 | Mr. A.M. Bell on 'The Neolithic Invasions of England' |
| April 30 | Mr. W.J. Lollas on 'The Neanderthal Race and its Most Recent Representative' |
| May 10 | Mr. W. McClintock on 'The Blackfoot Indians of the Rocky Mountains' |
| May 22 | Dr. C.G. Seligman on 'The Veddahs' |
| June 4 | Dr. W.H. Rivers on 'Melanesian Communion' |
| October 22 | Mr. R.R. Marett on 'Mr. Lang's Theory of Savage Supreme Beings' |
| November 3 | Mr. T.C. Hodson on 'Some Naga Customs' |
| November 16 | Mr. Routledge on 'Custom and Myth of the A'-Kikuya' |
| and lastly | |
| November 23 | Mr. Halliday on 'The Psychological Basis of' |

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Secretary, 1979-80,
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