

BYWAYS IN OXFORD ANTHROPOLOGY

Selections from the Minutes of the
Oxford University Anthropological Society

1919-1920: A Diet of Skulls, Women and Cannibals

Two current topics in anthropology, cannibalism and women, received an early airing in the history of the Anthropological Society. The minutes of the Society show that the debates had a slightly different flavour from today, as can be seen in a paper called 'Woman's Place in Nature' (October 30, 1919) in which Prof. J.L. Myres illuminated

... the ways in which economic give-and-take is affected for men and women respectively by regional controls of food supply and other external foods [factors?]. The reciprocal relationships of mutual service being in turn contrasted by the unreciprocal relationship involved in the perpetuation of the race.

The topic of cannibalism raised an intriguing idea on the applications of anthropology. The following minutes record a paper by Mr. Pearson Chinnery on February 5, 1920.

The paper was given with the object of proving that in certain districts of New Guinea functions such as cannibalism and head-hunting and other forms of homicide which formed part of the social and religious fabric of native life had been modified by anthropological methods which offered substitutes equally effective in perpetuating the institutions of the natives and bringing them in harmony with the standards of government.

One is relieved to find that such useful work was actively encouraged by the Australian Government but sadly one can only speculate on the nature of cannibalistic substitutes.

Cranial measurements were still the centre of heated discussion on November 5, 1920. Prof. F.G. Parsons argued in favour of 'social inheritance' in determining head form, as opposed to Prof. Flinders Petrie's 'geographical location'. In making his point Prof. Parsons gave this account of British heads.

He showed that the so-called long-headed north contained short-headed Lapps, and that the round-headed Alpine race had extended its head shape all over Germany, and in the last two hundred years had by peaceful penetration and the

power of working and breeding under conditions which other races would not tolerate, raised the cephalic index of the British Isles from under 77 to nearly 79.

This diet of skulls, women and cannibals swelled membership to 154 by the Michaelmas Term of 1920.

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Secretary, 1979-80
Oxf. Univ. Anthropol. Soc.

