

4. Realist and voluntarist schools of diffusionism

**PART II**  
**SOCIAL SCIENCE:**  
**SPECIALIZATION AND EXPERTISE**

**CHAPTER FOUR**  
**REALIST AND VOLUNTARIST SCHOOLS OF**  
**DIFFUSIONISM<sup>1</sup>**

*If the deciding factors are physical and ethnical, then it is hopeless to endeavour to raise, for example, a stone-age people to the level of European civilisation ... . If, however, the psychological factors are fundamental, a way might possibly be found of assisting such a people to derive some benefit from another culture ... .<sup>2</sup>*  
*Elkin in 1929.*

From before Australian Federation until the early 1930s, most scientists and administrators rarely, and then dimly, conceived of a destiny for the Aborigines other than racial and cultural doom.<sup>3</sup> This chapter we focus upon the attitude to science and its relation with practical affairs that inclined Elkin to accept this orthodox fatalism. We will also see how scientific training and a traveller's anti-colonial nationalism overlaid Elkin's ideas about religion. In this and the next chapter, we look to the years 1925 to 1929, when Elkin qualified himself as a professional scientist: first, via a PhD under the supervision of William Perry and Sir Grafton Elliot Smith at the University of London; and thereafter, during a Rockefeller Fellowship that comprised twelve months in the field in north-western Australia, then twelve months 'writing up' in Sydney.<sup>4</sup> During the latter period, Elkin wrote five articles about 'The Practical Value of Anthropology', the central tension of which is indicated in our epigraph.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Geoffrey Gray and Tim Rowse for feedback on this chapter.

<sup>2</sup> AP Elkin, 'The Practical Value of Anthropology', *Morpeth Review*, 1 (7), 1929, 23–33, at 33.

<sup>3</sup> Russell McGregor, *Imagined Destinies: Aboriginal Australians and the Doomed Race Theory, 1889–1939* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1997), Chs 1–4.

<sup>4</sup> Our focus is not the technical anthropological work, but the way in which Elkin sought to derive practical guidance from it.

<sup>5</sup> 'The Practical Value of Anthropology'; A. P. Elkin, 'The Practical Value of Anthropology: Physical Anthropology', *Morpeth Review*, 1 (8), 1929, 44–47; 'The Practical Value of Anthropology: Physical Anthropology, Man as a Member of the Human World', *Morpeth Review*, 1 (9), 1929, 33–44; 'The Practical

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He sought to reconcile a realist consensus (that Aborigines had no collective future), with an Idealist obligation (that ‘psychological factors’ ought to guide settler policy).

Though any such analysis is reductive, it is fruitful to consider Elkin’s conception of his role as a ‘practical’ anthropologist in terms of Idealist and realist impulses. In the first part of this chapter, we look at Elkin’s assimilation of aspects of Perry and Elliot Smith’s intellectual realism. Here, the Idealist / realist distinction applied on two levels: the nature of knowledge, and the data privileged in the conceptualisation of practical problems. For several years from 1925, Elkin tended towards positivism. He believed that science delimited the options available to administrators and reformers.<sup>6</sup> In terms of practical goals, he concerned himself with impersonal, material factors – geography, demography, race – pertinent to the Australian national interest. Between 1925 and 1929 these attributes were prominent in Elkin’s writings; they mark his realist phase.

However, in these years Elkin also studied a volitional approach to the diffusion of culture, pioneered by Elliot Smith’s key collaborator, W. H. R. Rivers. Rivers died in 1922, but his posthumous influence proved to be the more important aspect of Elkin’s formation as a diffusionist. Rivers opposed the governance of colonial peoples, except on the basis of radical advances in inter-cultural understanding. He required the anthropologist to focus upon the agency of Indigenous people – a novel and difficult undertaking with respect to the Aborigines amongst whom Elkin did his field work. As we will explore more fully in later chapters, Riversian anthropology, formed in part by interaction with scholarly Anglican missionaries including Robert Codrington (Chs. 2, 6), equipped Elkin to maintain a productively ambivalent approach to vying realist and Idealist frameworks available to the anthropologist who offered advice to colonisers.

In the second part of this chapter, we see Elkin’s Idealism flare as he prepared for his fieldwork, and quickly die down in contact with the frontier – its intractability to government, and the cultural impasse it had become for many Aborigines. Overall, his first interaction with Aborigines in contact situations inclined Elkin away from an Idealist engagement with

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Value of Anthropology II: Social anthropology’, *Morpeth Review*, 1 (10), 1929, 43–50; ‘Anthropology and Missionary Methods’, *Morpeth Review* II, March 1930, 34–37.

<sup>6</sup> According to Russell McGregor, *Imagined Destinies: Aboriginal Australians and the Doomed Race Theory, 1889–1939* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1997), 192: in Elkin’s thinking at this time, ‘the concept of race set the parameters of change.’

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Aboriginal autonomy, and towards a realist emphasis on biology, geopolitics, and positivist social science, for which Elliot Smith had prepared him.

*Elkin sought a practical scientific persona*

The positivist trend in Elkin's thinking was associated with a further cooling in his enthusiasm for Empire and its established Church. Elkin travelled with great expectations, but experienced the disillusion that often characterised "colonials'" visits 'home'. Letters he wrote 'in lieu of a journal' began as a tribute to the British Empire. At a North African stopover, he wrote '[t]his was our first experience of strange life and it was pleasant. Of course, one must remember that the island is British.'<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, at Port Said, 'the French influence is uppermost'; 'the jabbering, squabbling, rooking and dirt would make one sick.'<sup>8</sup> Historical allusions expressed a contrived excitement – sailing the Mediterranean recalled 'the stirring days of the Punic wars'.<sup>9</sup> In what deserves notice as the nadir of Elkin's prose, he described Gibraltar: 'It is honeycombed around in rabbit fashion and with guns hidden in its bosom, could burst forth as if in eruption.' 'Journeying in', Empire evoked a trite enthusiasm, consistent with the liberal idealist faith he propagated as a minister of the Anglican church but here identified with a militant mother.<sup>10</sup>

English life, as revealed to a minister of the established church, disappointed him. Class division punctured his habitual identification with empire. While he studied, he supported himself by casual work for the Church of England. Standing in as chaplain of a nursing home in Yorkshire, he found that

visitors were entertained in two rooms: the Lady Superior's for the special bloods or those who think they are such; the staff dining room for the others who include the people who really work for the house. ... Abominable

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<sup>7</sup> Elkin 1925, London journal and letters, EP 5/1/16, p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>10</sup> Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1993): Said develops the trope that when the colonised return from the periphery to the centre, they transform the meaning of colonisation for themselves and for colonisers alike. In Elkin's case, each of these transformations was wrought primarily upon himself – as coloniser but also as (not colonised but) colonial.

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I call it. I was directed into the former, but a few minutes after I scored my cup of tea, I went to the others. Snobbery and class distinction seem to be kept out of nothing.<sup>11</sup>

Nor did the Church of England impress him; he missed the relative vitality of the Diocese of Newcastle. He wrote to his cousin,

I am giving a course in the evenings on the wonder of life but the Parish doesn't show any signs of life. There is no really live work going on, nor anything from which I can learn. I have the impression the church here is far too much in the hands of the people who fill their declining years with the hobby of attending church meets.<sup>12</sup>

The Church malaise seemed typical of a general pall. 'Toryism, self-satisfaction with things as they used to be, the lack of initiative, is as it strikes me, the weakness.'<sup>13</sup>

A breach between science and religion was a crucial factor in his disillusion. Elkin's periods of religious flourishing occurred when Francis Anderson, Ernest Burgmann, and R. R. Marett – even Durkheim – led religion towards science, and vice versa (Chs. 2–3). In London, lacking such a convergence, Elkin's interests shifted, at least superficially, to the progressive, practical, and reassuringly sceptical domain of science. In view of his later religious writings, it seems likely that the special role Perry and Smith attributed to a 'priestly caste' in the diffusion of civilization throughout history and around the world satisfied Elkin that he could make better sense of spiritual life as an anthropologist than he could as a priest. In London, his intention to become a scientist firmed. As well as learning a theory of culture, he sought a new intellectual ethos.

The theory of culture was relatively straightforward. Grafton Elliot Smith claimed to introduce students in his Department of Anatomy at the University of London to a comprehensive science: 'human studies' anatomical, historical, and cultural.<sup>14</sup> In Elliot

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<sup>11</sup> Elkin, London journal and letters, cited in Tigger Wise, *The Self-Made Anthropologist: A Life of AP Elkin* (Sydney: George Allen & Unwin, 1985), 47. [I have no page reference for this entry in the journal, nor does Wise give one.]

<sup>12</sup> Elkin, London journal and letters, p. 29. The course was presumably the same religious interpretation of evolution that he had developed for his Wollombi congregation and the Newcastle WEA.

<sup>13</sup> Wise, *Self-Made Anthropologist*, 48.

<sup>14</sup> Henrika Kuklick, *The Savage Within: The Social History of British Anthropology, 1885–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 123–124.

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Smith's Department of Anatomy, Elkin dissected brains, and studied (pre-) historical culture contact and diffusion.<sup>15</sup>

Elliot Smith was a leading neurologist. His diffusionist school of anthropology owed its eminence in large part to the conversion in 1911 of W. H. R. Rivers to its premises: that culture was far more likely to be imitated than invented, and so progress occurred primarily through the contact of various peoples with a 'higher culture'.<sup>16</sup> In the 1920s, Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski rejected the diffusionists' attempts at historical reconstruction as too speculative, but the diffusionist histories were in their time an empirical riposte to the theorising of the Victorian evolutionary anthropologists. Rivers was, like Elliot Smith, a doctor of medicine with an academic speciality: he was Britain's leading experimental psychologist. Each believed that the diffusionist hypothesis gave anthropology the status of a real science, perhaps even the central 'human studies'.<sup>17</sup>

Diffusionist anthropology grew from empirical research. In the early 1900s, Rivers alerted Smith that desiccated brains survived in ancient Egyptian corpses. Smith was then Professor of Anatomy at the University of Cairo. With access to thousands of brains, from a broad swathe of ancient history, Smith broke new ground in the study of neurological evolution. His breakthrough finding was that the brain had barely altered over thousands of years. The differences he found were not temporal, but reflected the influx of different peoples into the Egyptian empire. For millennia, he concluded, humans had not evolved. Cultural exchange, not biological development, wrote history.

The archetypal cultural diffusion, Smith believed, was through the 'archaic civilization'.<sup>18</sup> It had arisen in prehistoric Egypt by a series of coincidences stemming from the annual flooding of the Nile and leading to beliefs about an afterlife, military superiority, and division of labour based on factors including a priestly caste and the slavery of prisoners of war. Higher culture was not the result of evolutionary law, nor any Idealist spirit; it developed through contingent historical processes.

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<sup>15</sup> His immediate supervisor was W. H. Perry, Reader in Cultural Anthropology.

<sup>16</sup> For the eminence in the 1920s of diffusionism among schools of anthropology, see Kuklick, *Savage Within*, 122–124. For an account that plays down the importance of Elliot Smith while fully developing Rivers' centrality to British social anthropology, see George W. Stocking, Jr., *After Tylor* (London: Athlone, 1995), 179–230, especially 228–229.

<sup>17</sup> Kuklick, *Savage Within*, 123–124.

<sup>18</sup> See G. Elliot Smith, *The Evolution of Man: Essays* (London: Oxford University Press, 1924); See also William Perry's work, below.

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The diffusionists believed that cultural advance was not a natural tendency. Progress was the dynamic exception; regression was the norm. For each of the detailed cultural studies Rivers made, he found that only the idea that cultures had regressed from the influence of higher sources fitted his data. He supposed that the Todas, in India, continued religious practices derived from Christian and Jewish influences one thousand years old, and had lost any living sense of their significance.<sup>19</sup> He organised his subsequent study and major work, the *History of Melanesia*, around two lines of degeneration.<sup>20</sup>

William Perry, who supervised Elkin's Doctorate, like Elliot Smith believed that one 'archaic civilization' had spread civilization over the globe. Perry pursued the one idea in most if not all of his published works: 'the children of the sun' diffused spiritual, economic, material, and commercial aspects of its culture, as their sun cult inspired them to seek various physical aids to eternal life, notably gold, shells, and pearls.<sup>21</sup> Elkin argued in his Doctorate that Aborigines' beliefs and rituals reflected two separate lines of influence, from the archaic civilization, mediated through Asian cultures.<sup>22</sup> He thus exactly extended Perry's ethnology.<sup>23</sup> Certain Aboriginal tribes had either regressed, or had never fully comprehended the nature of the beliefs that had transformed their social organization, ritual practices, and belief.<sup>24</sup> Although Elkin never explicated the significance of the Aborigines' imperfect ideation, we may observe that it contrasted with his ideal of advancing social consciousness (Ch. 1), and so by implication corresponded with a static or retracting zone of human freedom. But what had retracted, could expand again. A politically useful aspect of the idea that societies regressed culturally was that the process was reversible.

The regressive hypothesis suited the era of conscious empire building that characterised the latter decades of 'the third empire.' A higher culture generated the incentive

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<sup>19</sup> Stocking, *After Tylor*, 189–193.

<sup>20</sup> WHR Rivers, *The History of Melanesian Society* (Cambridge: CUP, 1914). In 1915 Elliot Smith announced his *The Migrations of Early Culture* (singular) as an extension of Rivers' 'great monograph'. Rivers had established explanatory power of devolution, regression, degeneration. Stocking, *After Tylor*, 208.

<sup>21</sup> His major works were WJ Perry, *The Origin of Magic and Religion* (London: Methuen, 1923) and *idem*, *The Children of the Sun* (London: Methuen, 1923).

<sup>22</sup> AP Elkin, 'Ritual and Mythology in Australia: An Historical Study', PhD manuscript, 1927. Fisher Rare Books, Elkin 011.

<sup>23</sup> Elkin's PhD submitted his with the beginning of a rewrite appended. In these more finished chapters, Elkin began to draw out the ways in which his data supported Perry's argument. Wise may not have taken this into account when she concluded that Elkin's thesis paid lip-service to the archaic civilisation, via a formulaic summing up. See *Self-Made Anthropologist*, 49.

<sup>24</sup> Elkin, 'Ritual and Mythology in Australia', 269–270, for example.

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and capacity to draw wealth from surrounding cultures. Trade diffused certain of its practices and beliefs, and left a wake of transformed lower cultures. If the trade routes retracted – due, perhaps, to the wasting effect of war – the influence of the higher culture waned, and the isolated societies were likely to regress. Diffusionism came to the fore after World War One, in part because it both legitimated and urged on the liberal colonialism of the ‘sacred trust’. As Elliot Smith saw it, a scientifically educated democracy would reject the corrupt interests of a ruling class, understand and meet the majority’s real needs, and the needs of their primitive charges. As Elkin saw it, if the Aborigines had regressed from ancient spiritual advance, British Australia could return them to the mainstream of Christian civilization.<sup>25</sup>

*Realism vs. hermeneutics and scepticism vs. psychodynamics*

Diffusionism comprised a school of thought. It was not only a theory propounded collaboratively, it was also a small group of friends, who shared, and competed over, an ethos. Elliot Smith, Rivers, and Perry advanced each other’s careers and influenced each other’s political attitudes.<sup>26</sup> They thought colonialism as currently constituted was grossly unjust, but nonetheless necessary. They agreed that anthropology – conceived as an integrated, holistic science – provided an opportunity for imperial reform. Yet Elkin found the ethos of diffusionism more difficult to absorb than its theory of culture, because it was built upon unacknowledged or papered-over contradictions between the leaders of the school, Elliot Smith and Rivers. We will notice these tensions by drawing out the diffusionists’ ideas about the historical role of priests.

Elliot Smith and Perry believed that the human sciences need not involve hermeneutical complexity. Motivation and meaning were easy to understand, given

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<sup>25</sup> Prior to his Doctorate, responding to his reading of the diffusionists, he wrote of the Aborigines ‘Their possibilities once were great, and we cannot say that they are not so now, given adequate time and suitable environment. Certainly, we white Australians have a duty. We may not be able to make up for our neglect and wrong actions during the past 140 years, yet we should do all in our power to make happier the lot of the few remaining tribes, and this we can do, if we base our action on an intelligent understanding of their customs, of their mental and physical development, and long Australian and world history.’ AP Elkin ‘The Australian Blacks’, *Voice of the North*, 12 February 1924. For a general account of the diffusionists’ regressive hypothesis and its fit with imperialism, see Kuklick, *Savage Within*, 255, 262, 264.

<sup>26</sup> A controversial and relevant aspect of this camaraderie was the way Elliot Smith and Perry took advantage of their opportunity as Rivers’ literary executors. In Prefaces and Appendices, they each argued that when he died, Rivers was coming round to a less cautious affirmation of the significance of the archaic civilization, then the subject of intense critique. These books were published just when Elkin met Perry in Sydney, applied to study with him, and set to reading. He joined a partisan band. See, for example, Smith’s Preface and Perry’s Appendix to WHR Rivers, *Social Organisation* (ed. WJ Perry) London: Kegan Paul, 1924).



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scepticism towards everything but the premise that a simple self-interest ought to enlist reason and science in its aid. The drive to secure one's own material and psychological security and advantage was the great constant in history, they taught. That drive's most seminal form was the idea that one's preparations upon earth could secure immortality. As Perry wrote:

It was this belief, formulated by the Egyptians in early dynastic times, that constituted one of the most powerful incentives to action that man has ever possessed, an incentive which led to a world-wide spread of culture as the search for the Earthly paradise.<sup>27</sup>

A key to the diffusionists' success was that they made a great deal of simple ideas: the overwhelming importance as a motivator of the conviction of an afterlife amenable to earthly effort struck modern readers as a sensible proposition.

Religious diffusion began (to simplify Perry's argument only a little) with the invention of the solar calendar in southern Egypt. An intellectual class, the Heliopolitans, elaborated the discovery, in mystical and practical forms, administered a new system of irrigation-based agriculture, and gained control of the state. They believed that their miraculous insight into the timeless round of agriculture would continue beyond death. God-Kings who regulated the normal seasonal cycle could be kept alive in the next world by blood sacrifices, the ministrations of which was the source of a priestly caste's power. A possibility conceived with reference to the King – who alone understood the calendar, the crop cycle, and the Sun God – over time, spread to his subjects. As more Egyptians prepared for eternal life, they needed more blood sacrifices. 'The earliest warfare consisted in slave-raiding and head-hunting; and the motive that prompted it was the common human desire to secure ease and luxury, both in this world and the next, at the expense of one's fellow men,' explained Elliot Smith.<sup>28</sup> Neither survival of the fittest, nor any specific innate characteristic such as pugnacity determined history, but the 'exploits of a military aristocracy', driven by the dispensers of eternal life, the priests.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> WJ Perry, *The Origin of Magic and Religion* (London: Methuen, 1923), vi., 208–219.

<sup>28</sup> Elliot Smith, *Evolution of Man*, 132.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

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This morbid variety of religious vitalism that catered religiously to the self-interest of all remained politically the property of a priestly caste. What had begun as a series of erroneous assumptions – about the relation between the mystery of the solar calendar, a desiccated corpse, and knowledge of the seasons, blood, and water – continued as the politics of mystery. According to Elliot Smith, the God-King ‘was the prototype of all the gods’. Religion and caste spread around the world, along with advanced agricultural technology and architecture derived from the Egyptian interest in permanent stone tombs.

[H]is ritual was the basis of all religious ceremonial; his priests who conducted the animating ceremonies were the pioneers of a long series of ministers who for more than fifty centuries, in spite of the endless variety of details of their ritual and the character of their temples, have continued to perform ceremonies that have undergone remarkably little essential change.<sup>30</sup>

Over these fifty centuries, religion became ‘so complexly enriched with the glamour of a mystic symbolism’, that its Egyptian origin was obscured. For most of these centuries, priests had carefully kept their hold on power by guarding defunct beliefs from the advance of science. ‘A priesthood, seeking to preserve its place in the popular imagination, made it an obligation of belief to accept these supernatural powers of the gods for which the student of moral phenomena refused any longer to be a sponsor.’ Thus science and religion parted ways.<sup>31</sup>

Elliot Smith and Perry concluded that democratic liberalism offered a way forward, if only people would abandon the irrational beliefs that tied them to rulers’ interests. Thus, the salient factor in progressive thinking – individual or social – was the ability and inclination to test received notions, strip them of emotion and custom, and arrive at ‘a consistent and really satisfying explanation of natural phenomena and human history.’<sup>32</sup> But few aspired to the goal of consistent rational clarity. ‘For the vast majority of mankind’, Elliot Smith averred, received beliefs (presumably excepting scientific traditions) constituted ‘a desire for escape from the necessity of thinking.’ Disciplinary divisions, to the extent that they contained an individual’s enquiry, served the same escapist end.

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<sup>30</sup> G. Elliot Smith, *The Evolution of the Dragon* (Manchester: Longmans, Green & Co., 1919), 32.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 32–35. Perry cited these passages in *Origin of Religion*, 477–478.

<sup>32</sup> Elliot Smith, *Evolution of Man*, 64–65, 117–119, 134, 154 and *passim*.

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Elliot Smith believed that reason laid out cause and effect in human studies as surely as in natural science. Indeed, they were one field of enquiry, already accessible *in toto* to the penetrating mind. The belief that self-interest provided for human studies the general and regular principle of cause and effect that the lawfulness of nature provided for other sciences was the epistemological aspect of what I mean by ‘realism’.

Needless to say, Reverend Elkin demurred. He accepted that priests continued a religious development that had been, and was still, associated with the evils of class and war.<sup>33</sup> But he continued to believe, with Robertson Smith and Marett, that religious people were the guardians of the only way beyond these evils. We will see in Chapter Seven how between 1929 and 1933 he thought and wrote his way out of realism and into a new rationale for his commitment to religious ritual. He argued that ‘mystery’ and religious ‘glamour’ supported and socialised reverence and humility. He used those phrases most often with reference to Aborigines.<sup>34</sup> Concerning his own Church services he spoke of ritual, and never without adding that ritual was empty unless it bore spiritual fruit.<sup>35</sup>

Ritual and reverence were the parents of religious belief, and of Idealism, Elkin decided. If humanity were to advance towards freedom and justice, the conditions for altruism needed to be strengthened, not undermined by a psychologically naïve rationalism. Thus Elkin drew conclusions diametrically opposed to Elliot Smith concerning the latter’s thesis that a priestly caste, guardians of a culture of religious vitalism, was central to history. In accepting that mystery and glamour might have valid social functions – non-rational rather than irrational – Elkin was following a psychobiological line of reasoning pioneered by Marett (Ch. 3), and in which Rivers was also interested.

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<sup>33</sup> But explaining militancy, Elkin put the maternal principle first: ‘History also suggests that an education in cruelty and a preparation for warfare was associated with early religion, especially with that which centred around the earth goddess, and later, sun. To maintain the power of the Divine Being, sacrifice and blood-letting were necessary.’ AP Elkin, ‘War and the Future’, *The Church Standard*, 4 July 1924, Papers of Elkin, NLA, MS9834/2/1.

<sup>34</sup> For example, he wrote that the secrecy of religious knowledge ‘adds to its importance, for it throws around it that glamour, sanctity, and mystery which is so valuable in the case of moral and social sanctions.’ AP Elkin, ‘The Secret Life of the Aborigines’, *Oceania*, III, (2) Dec 1932, 119–138, at 130.

<sup>35</sup> His sermon notes for his first address to his Morpeth congregation (see Ch. 5) indicate what he wanted to explain about his role: ‘Use ritual that is most helpful and most worthy. Creeds and rituals dry bones – must be [employed?] in faith and Actions.’ First address to Morpeth congregation: paginated manuscript, July 1929, EP 5/3/3.

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*Secret societies and 'the psychological factor'*

Rivers viewed priests as psychoanalysts, not sly politicians or manipulators of the naive.<sup>36</sup> Priests pioneered medicine, before the power of the mind became separated from the objective science of anatomy. The various cultures of priesthood, including practices such as confession, contained accumulated psychological wisdom, which science could guide, but from which scientists should also seek to learn.<sup>37</sup> Thus, Rivers agreed with Elliot Smith concerning 'the intellectually dysfunctional consequences of overspecialisation'; but the psychologist differed from the anatomist regarding hermeneutics and the complexity of motivation.<sup>38</sup>

Rivers did not believe social scientists could answer the important questions about the nature of society – yet.<sup>39</sup> While Elliot Smith saw the independent, individual, penetrating reason as the perennial key to understanding, Rivers saw interdependent, intercultural, dialogic exchange as the path towards it. Most relevantly for our purposes, Rivers brought a reflexive methodology (derived from Codrington, and from personal contact with the Melanesian Mission, as we will see in Chapter six) into British social anthropology by insisting that even the necessary conditions of sustained contact with indigenous communities, and a basic knowledge of the language would not suffice for sound fieldwork – they might just lodge errors deeper into the data. The ethnographer's best hope of understanding tribal informants lay in his silent attention and scepticism regarding European assumptions.<sup>40</sup> (This was not Elliot Smith's style.)

Rivers respected the primitive point of view, including its non-rational aspects. Societies persisted in primitive form when they achieved a religious consensus based on an harmonious integration of instincts, order, and events.<sup>41</sup> This resonated with Rivers' intellectual ideal. Whereas Smith's epistemological practice centred on things posited as

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<sup>36</sup> WHR Rivers, *Medicine, Magic, and Religion* (London: Kegan Paul, 1924).

<sup>37</sup> *Idem*, 'Psycho-therapeutics', in James Hastings (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* Vol. 10, (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1918).

<sup>38</sup> Kuklick, *Savage Within*, 138.

<sup>39</sup> Richard Slobodin, *WHR Rivers* (NY: Columbia UP, 1978), 162.

<sup>40</sup> Stocking, *After Tylor*, 12, 124.

<sup>41</sup> 'The Unity of Anthropology', *Presidential Address to the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, *JRAIGBI* 52 (1922), 12–25, reprinted in Richard Slobodin, *WHR Rivers* (NY: Columbia UP, 1978), 260–273.

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known, for Rivers, practical anthropological knowledge was more a discovery of the order of things within which different points of view could converge.

The episode that best demonstrates both the shared diffusionist ethos and the diverging paths of its leaders occurred in a World War One military hospital. Treating victims of shell shock, Elliot Smith supposed that he was dealing with psychosomatic disorders. He summoned Rivers' aid. Rivers diagnosed a syndrome of psychological suppression. He pioneered its treatment by narrative therapy. From this, the two diffusionists drew different lessons. When Elliot Smith referred back to the diagnosis of shell shock, he used it as an extreme example of a general psychological tendency to rationalise emotions falsely, which only the trained or otherwise exceptional thinker could overcome.<sup>42</sup> That the symptoms of shell shock may have expressed a significant response to the war; that suffering and an associated incoherence may be as 'real' as the psychological principles that alleviated them – these possibilities Elliot Smith discounted.

For Rivers, the lessons were not so simple. After treating the poet Siegfried Sassoon, and returning him to the trenches to do his duty, Rivers analysed his own dreams that, influenced by his patient, he had become a pacifist.<sup>43</sup> He applied the lessons of the military hospital to another instance of psychological trauma, indigenous peoples' experience of colonisation, with reference to which he prioritised the 'psychological factor' as a leading but underestimated cause of morbidity (Ch. 6).<sup>44</sup> Rivers argued that it would be an

interesting experiment to see how far it is possible ... to maintain [Melanesians'] old interests and make them the foundation in [sic] which to build a culture which would not conflict with the ethical and social ideals of the people who have come to be their rulers.<sup>45</sup>

It was the seminal work in the applied anthropological project of sustained, scientific attempts to establish understanding across a chasm of ignorance and suppression. In 1929, Elkin used Rivers' key phrases, but only in a subordinate counter-argument; his main concern was to reconcile Australian racialism with humane obligation (Ch. 5). Thus the realist and the

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<sup>42</sup> Elliot Smith, *Evolution of Man*, 65.

<sup>43</sup> Stocking, *After Tylor*, 239.

<sup>44</sup> WHR Rivers (ed.), 'The Psychological Factor', in *idem, Essays on the Depopulation of Melanesia* (Cambridge: CUP, 1922), 84–113.

<sup>45</sup> Rivers, 'The Psychological Factor', 107. We know Elkin was aware of that seminal essay of Rivers' because of the clippings he kept of ensuing debates (see Ch. 6).

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volitional / Idealistic strands of the diffusionist school remained competing tendencies in Elkin's attempts to establish a practical scientific outlook. Each approach implied a different concept of race.

*Elliot Smith on race*

The diffusionists were criticised for eliding race from their analysis of culture.<sup>46</sup> Yet, after Elkin graduated from their 'school', he entered a phase of thinking in which his racialism almost pulled free from his universalist ideals. Somehow, Elkin was encouraged in his racialism while studying with the school of anthropology renowned for its renunciation of race as a causative factor in cultural development. The key to this apparent paradox was that no diffusionist attempted a comprehensive rebuttal of racial determinism.<sup>47</sup> Elliot Smith merely *demoted* racial explanations beneath cultural and historical factors; Rivers opposed racialism on governmental and administrative grounds.<sup>48</sup>

Elliot Smith was ambivalent on race, for reasons that obtained for Elkin also. Elliot Smith was an eminent comparative racial neurologist, the leading expert on racial evolution, and had grown up in white Australia: all factors tending towards a racial interpretation of culture.<sup>49</sup> Prior to the First World War, he had taught that cultural superiority was as much a function of supposed racial characteristics – intelligence, restlessness, industry – as of historical events.<sup>50</sup> But even in his early, racist period, Elliot Smith was committed to a liberal political position. As an anthropologist reporting on behalf of the 1904 Committee on Physical Deterioration, commissioned to inquire into the possible degeneration of the British race, his findings exceeded his brief: any human 'could be socialized into the habits of any of

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<sup>46</sup> George Henry Lane-Fox Pit-Rivers, *The Clash of Culture and the Contact of Races* (London, George Routledge and Sons, 1927), 8-11 argued that diffusionists could never adequately address the practical consequences of colonialism because the primacy of culture in their explanatory scheme could not comprehend the implications of racial difference. See Ch. 5.

<sup>47</sup> Stocking, *After Tylor*, 124–125: British social anthropology lacked a Boas. Although in the 1904 Report on Physical Degeneration Elliot Smith claimed that any society could educate any human such that he could contribute usefully to it, he did not make the case strongly enough to persuade others to resist the racist implications of his own anatomical findings. In the 1920s, Elkin was a disciple but used Elliot Smith's work to justify racialism.

<sup>48</sup> WHR Rivers, 'The Government of Subject Peoples', in AC Seward (ed.) *Science and the Nation* (Cambridge: CUP, 1917), 302–327; and 'The Psychological Factor'.

<sup>49</sup> Warwick Anderson, *Cultivating Whiteness: Science, Health and Racial Destiny in Australia* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2002), 4.

<sup>50</sup> Kuklick, *Savage Within*, 260.

#### 4. Realist and voluntarist schools of diffusionism

the societies of the world.<sup>51</sup> As he wrote elsewhere, nature had done its work in evolving ‘the intellectual supremacy ... the divine form of Man’; now nurture must see to cultural advance.<sup>52</sup> This liberal political stance was in part a product of his background within the ‘cultural liberal’ tradition, which centred upon the University of Sydney when he was an undergraduate there.<sup>53</sup> Humanistic or cultural Australian responses to race tended to register conflict between liberalism and the exclusionary strategic imperatives of the white Australia policy.

Elliot Smith’s liberal commitment regarding the cultural insignificance of race firmed after Rivers adopted the diffusionist approach to cultural anthropology. Elliot Smith then promoted Rivers’ view that social structure determined which innate human characteristics would be expressed, and retracted his earlier statements concerning the causal role of race in cultural development.<sup>54</sup> After Rivers’ death in 1922, Elliot Smith maintained the position that differences in cultural capacity were the outcome of social structure and not racial biology.<sup>55</sup> In his history of culture, Elliot Smith promoted liberal ideas.

But he was more famous for his neurological findings, often deployed by racial determinists. The central focus of Elliot Smith’s work and reputation remained neurology. He argued that racial characteristics included statistically significant differences in brain size; and that the relative advantage the ‘higher races’ enjoyed was concentrated in the ‘supragranular layer, which in the ‘higher’ races continued growing after puberty, and which enabled abstract thinking.<sup>56</sup>

Elliot Smith popularised a pre-historical human family tree, early branches of which, neatly pruned in his oft-reproduced diagrams, represented extinct pre-human and / or early human cousins. Although he emphasized that surviving races, including the ‘lowest’ (Aborigines and Negroes) shared the capacity to master nature and evolve culturally, physical anthropologists often interpreted his diagram to imply that on the lower branches of the tree, extinctions would continue.

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

<sup>52</sup> Elliot Smith, *Evolution of Man*, 77.

<sup>53</sup> Melleuish has emphasized that NSW’s free trade orientation had a philosophical corollary in the dominant, emphatically universalist school of thought he has associated with Francis Anderson, Elliot Smith, Ernest Burgmann and others. Melleuish, *Cultural Liberalism in Australia*, 29–32, 133.

<sup>54</sup> Kuklick, *Savage Within*, 260.

<sup>55</sup> Elliot Smith, *Evolution of Man*, 133.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 139–144.

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As we will see (Ch. 5), in the 1920s, Elkin's interest in racial biology inclined him towards absorptionism: a policy that implied the elimination of Aboriginal culture and race. Elkin had read Elliot Smith's work since at least 1914, and in WEA courses throughout the 1920s he repeated the master's statistics on brain size and structure.<sup>57</sup> He wrote that 'officials and missionaries go from us to direct the life of primitive peoples, but they cannot do this wisely and justly without having beforehand a knowledge of *the mental and social equipment of the people ...*'.<sup>58</sup> Still in 1929, he specified that the alleged mental inferiority of Aborigines relative to white settlers required that racial science should guide government policy (Ch. 5). He reluctantly agreed with the physical anthropologists' consensus that significant differences in brain capacity and process proved that full-blood Aborigines, like Negroes, probably could not be expected to participate as economic or political equals in industrial civilization.<sup>59</sup> Elkin's sources based this scientific racism in part on Elliot Smith's neurological data. Racialism's salience for Elkin was reinforced by the Professor's personal and institutional influence: he supervised Elkin's PhD, helped place him in the field, and – Elkin at least believed – had been instrumental in saving the Chair that made Australian anthropology a going concern.<sup>60</sup>

Elliot Smith's rationalist mindset displaced, for a time, the Christian universalism that had pervaded Elkin's thinking since his undergraduate days. It explained as mere social mechanisms both the strivings of the human spirit after God, and complexes of shared ideals. Elliot Smith believed that inherited non-material culture (presumably other than hard sciences) was a cloud of vague beliefs that obstructed the individual's reason.<sup>61</sup> Elliot Smith's influence was the major cause of a realist trend in Elkin's thinking, to which the temporary dimming of the latter's religious vocation, and his rising identification with the dream that egalitarian Australian nationalism would create 'better Britons', also contributed.

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<sup>57</sup> Elkin answered an unspecified question after a WEA lecture on evolution thus: brain capacity distinguishes man from ape; largest ape brain 600 cubic cm, Australian black 1250, modern European 1500. Elliot Smith says that lower than 1000 is not human but one case was 960. See A. P. Elkin, 'Primitive Peoples: What They Teach' *The Newcastle Sun* June 12, 1923, in Newspaper cuttings 1914–1927, NLA MS 9834/2/1 See also Elkin 1924, 'The Australian Blacks'.

<sup>58</sup> Elkin, 'Primitive Peoples: What They Teach'. Emphasis mine.

<sup>59</sup> Frank H. Hankins, *The Racial Basis of Civilisation: A Critique of the Nordic Doctrine* (NY and London: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926), 322.

<sup>60</sup> AP Elkin, 'Anthropology in Australia: One Chapter', *Mankind*, 5, 225–242.

<sup>61</sup> Elliot Smith, *Evolution of Man*, 154. My perspective on the antimetaphysical, secular nature of diffusionist thought complements Kuklick's account. See Kuklick, *Savage Within*, 260–264.



#### 4. Realist and voluntarist schools of diffusionism

##### *Elkin's realist persona: Rationalism, nationalism, race*

Elkin established a secular, nationalist, and scientific public voice in the four years during and after his Doctorate. Earlier in the twenties, in WEA lectures and in book reviews, he had elaborated the idea of a meaningful creation, responsive to the individual's spiritual effort, and especially fitted to communal and 'organised' religious devotion. Then, he wrote mainly for Anglican audiences, and fashioned a clerical persona distinguished by a scientific precision. From 1925, by contrast, when he began to qualify himself as a professional scientist, his religious vocation was inconspicuous. He distanced himself from a 'humanitarian' focus upon the wellbeing of particular peoples, instead attending to the higher races' government of lower races. He concentrated upon white Australia's national interests, without explicitly qualifying them (as he had in the past, Ch. 1) with reference to universal principles.<sup>62</sup> These trends were first evident in two articles he wrote for a general Australian public while in London.<sup>63</sup> He contributed them to *Voice of the North*, a nationalist journal edited by J. J. Moloney of the Australian Patriots Association.

In the first of these articles, Elkin reviewed the proposal to establish a model Aboriginal state (MAS). Proposed as a principle for the administration of a new reserve in Arnhem Land, the MAS would allow Aborigines to access formal, secular tutelage in industrial civilization on their own real estate, then determine their own government and economy.<sup>64</sup> Colonel Genders, a retired military officer, had gathered a committee of anthropologists, medical men and administrators, based in Adelaide, which had authorised the petition to the Commonwealth government. Genders campaigned as a concerned and

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<sup>62</sup> Regarding religion, the important exception was Elkin's 'Report on Forrest River Mission', 1928, EP 1/12/96, see Ch. 6.

<sup>63</sup> AP Elkin, 'Australia and its Aborigines: An Interesting Experiment', and 'Notes from an Australian Abroad', *Voice of the North*, October 1926, both on p. 18.

<sup>64</sup> Kevin Blackburn, 'White Agitation for an Aboriginal State in Australia (1925–1929)', *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 45 (2), 1999, 157–180. For as long as necessary, qualified white people would tutor Aborigines in the ways of modernity, facilitating Aboriginal self-adaptation. Only specially licensed white people would be admitted to the reserve. Aborigines would be free to move between it and white society. However, Aborigines who did not meet white standards of health and housing would not be permitted to reside outside the reserve.

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informed citizen, and argued for his plan on liberal political grounds. Surely, he implored, we have learnt that it is futile to impose our rule upon intelligent men? <sup>65</sup>

Elkin responded that the MAS was worth attempting if only because it would yield results that might assist more effective ventures in the future.<sup>66</sup> With the detachment of one who thinks in terms of millennia, rather than actual lives, he concluded his review:

... secret rites apart, [the Aborigines] are living much the same sort of life as did those extinct types of men tens of thousands of years ago. Up to the present, extinction has followed on contact with a higher type of man. ... [H]ave the Australian aborigines so atrophied, as it were, that extinction is their only future once their mode of life and thought has been disturbed?

Such questions are full of interest, and the experiment suggested in the petition would at least be a help towards providing answers.<sup>67</sup>

He wrote that the proposal's 'main motive [was] humanitarian'; nevertheless, it was 'a most interesting suggestion'.<sup>68</sup>

As he held humanitarianism at arm's length, he also played down the importance of religion. He noted that 'secret rites' were the one aspect of Aboriginal culture that reflected some advance from the 'sort of life' he associated with 'extinct types of men'. If this implied that he was already interested in the secret, religious life as the vehicle for a Riversian, *collective* Aboriginal adaptation (Ch. 6), he chose not to elaborate. Instead, religion featured in Elkin's review of the MAS as one in a series of indicators that *individual* Aborigines were capable of 'advance'. Aborigines had succeeded as police trackers, farm workers, and precocious schoolchildren; one was an industrial inventor, another, a deacon in the Church of England. His list went on: an engineer in a small arms factory, a champion draughts player, and a mathematician. Of course, his purpose was to illustrate a variety of Aborigines' achievements, but for a cleric semantically to equate draughts and ministry is noteworthy.

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<sup>65</sup> Commonwealth of Australia Conference of Representatives of Missions, Societies and Associations Interested in the Welfare of Aborigines to consider the report and recommendations submitted to the Commonwealth govt by JW Bleakley, convened by Minister of State for Home Affairs Hon CLA Abbott. Melb 12/4/1929. EP 1/12/2.

<sup>66</sup> Elkin, 'Australia and its Aborigines: An Interesting Experiment'.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> Anthropologists of the 1920s distinguished between humanitarian and scientific discourses especially when distancing themselves from the 'sentimental' principle that all races were equal in capacity or potential, not just in humanity and dignity. See, for example, Hankins, *Racial Basis*, 30; Pitt-Rivers, *Clash of Cultures*, 17. For Rivers' use of the identical phrase 'an interesting experiment', also situating a scientific response to the possibility of a policy based on indigenous autonomy, see Rivers, 'The Psychological Factor', 107.

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Further, he appropriated religious language to nationalist ends. In the accompanying article, 'Notes from an Australian Abroad', he appealed to Australians who travelled to England to promote their country. He wanted to overcome English ignorance and disdain, and to attract 'good, sturdy' immigrants.<sup>69</sup> In accord with the nationalist agenda of *The Voice of the North*, Elkin transferred religious zeal from the spiritual to the temporal realm: 'missionaries, idealists, preachers, poets and enthusiasts for Australia are wanted – people who love her and are keen ... to inform and attract.' Later in the article he wrote that it was 'the duty of every Australian who visits England to come prepared to be ... a missionary. Australia needs this.'<sup>70</sup> His sense of mission was tending to the secular sphere, in the pursuit of national honour, and the right – white – sort of immigrant.

In Elkin's review essay on the model Aboriginal state, he showed as much interest in national development as in Genders' attempt to provide a platform for Aboriginal autonomy. When he wrote for an Australian audience, the second aspect I mean to denote by 'realism' came into play: impersonal forces – international security, demography, the racial aspects of labour – objectively considered. 'What we may call the political interest in the experiment is associated with the using of the hotter parts of North Australia,' he wrote. White people were capable of working there, 'but, naturally, it will be a long time before they are adequately settled.' In the meantime, he went on, the White Australia policy attracted criticism on account of 'great spaces of which no use is being made.' Elkin ruled out any possibility of 'deviating' from the policy 'and running the risk of an introduced "colour problem", or of having the Australian standard of living lowered.'

He speculated that an Aboriginal state might be guided to 'use the north to advantage.'<sup>71</sup> Here, at the first public statement of Elkin's interest in Aborigines' role in the development of the north – an interest that would endure into the 1970s, peaking in 1948 with his membership of the North Australian Development Committee – he unwittingly foreshadowed the problem that *Aboriginal* advance might be provisional. Elkin seemed to imply that Aborigines ought to begin developing the north, until white Australia had fulfilled its destiny of 'a continent for a nation and a nation for a continent.'<sup>72</sup> Then Aborigines'

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<sup>69</sup> Elkin, 'Notes from an Australian Abroad'.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> Edmund Barton, at a meeting in Ashfield, New South Wales, 1893, cited by Bernhard R. Wise, *The*

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interests, having been defined under white tutelage, would segue nicely into a collective national interest. So much, in that scenario, for Genders' attempt to create a space for Aboriginal autonomy. Elkin passed quickly over the questions of racial preservation and of imperial honour. For him, the issue was whether Aborigines were able to further one, national interest.

Omissions in Elkin's account of the MAS illumine his orientation towards the thinker's part in national development. He ignored the proposition that Aborigines should own land. Despite Elkin's focus upon depopulation, he also ignored the petition's emphasis upon the increase in Maori population since they achieved parliamentary representation.<sup>73</sup> In 1929, Elkin did note the parallel between Maori and Aboriginal possibilities within settler societies, but he again ignored legal reform, and focussed his comparison instead upon the significance of biological factors – race and miscegenation.<sup>74</sup>

Another notable omission in Elkin's review was the petition's new rationale for permanent Aboriginal reserves. One enduring practical legacy of the passing generation of Australian anthropologists was their achievement of massive reserves for Aborigines in central Australia, and the momentum – of which Genders' agitation was a part – that would see the Arnhem Land reserve come to fruition in 1931.<sup>75</sup> These reserves have proved to be of the greatest practical significance in Aboriginal history. Governments recommended and granted the land before it became valuable to settler society (it was never zoned inviolable); and, as Altman and Rowse have argued, anthropologists proposed the reserves because they were unable to articulate Aboriginal and settler Australian interests in ways that would make co-habitation viable. Elkin recommended Genders' plan precisely because it would at least test a theory about how such an articulation might come about. Elkin was interested in the development of a policy that would make large reserves redundant.

That a realist conception of Australian interests dominated Elkin's articles in *The Voice of the North* might be merely a function of the journal's nationalism; but three years later he developed the same priorities in a series of articles for a Church journal in which he

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*Commonwealth of Australia* (London: Sir Isaac Pitman & Sons, 1913), ix.

<sup>73</sup> For a discussion of the Maori precedent, see Kevin Blackburn, 'White Agitation for an Aboriginal State in Australia (1925–1929)', at 165–166.

<sup>74</sup> Elkin, 'The Practical Value of Anthropology', 30–33.

<sup>75</sup> John Altman and Tim Rowse, 'Indigenous Affairs' in Peter Saunders and James Walter (eds.) *Ideas and Influence: Social Science and Public Policy in Australia* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2005), 159–177, at 159–162.

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formulated 'The Practical Value of Anthropology'. Before addressing those pivotal arguments (Ch. 5), we need to understand how the Australian field work Elkin conducted immediately after his London Doctorate tended overall to confirm his focus upon impersonal questions of geopolitics and biology – and not volition, individual or corporate – as the keys to Aborigines' destiny.

##### *The Kimberleys, 1927: scientific enquiry athwart civic purpose*

As Elkin prepared for his first twelve months in the field, where he was to study Aboriginal kinship and religion, he had two meetings, each crucial in a different way. He met with the local sponsor of his research trip, Western Australia's Chief Protector of Aborigines, A. O. Neville. From Neville, Elkin learnt the administrator's grim perspective upon Aboriginal affairs. He also met with a journalist to whom Elkin revealed the diffusionist ideas with which he approached his field-work. A third perspective pertinent to our understanding of Elkin's attitude as he encountered traditional Aboriginal societies for the first time was that of the Professor of Anthropology who obtained for Elkin the opportunity to undertake the expedition and to whom Elkin reported its results.

In the interview with the journalist, Elkin expressed his Idealist concern with the 'psychological factors' – Aboriginal opinion – and his realist expectation that inter-cultural dialogue would avail little in this instance but must be attempted nonetheless. He told a reporter with the *West Australian* newspaper that as an anthropologist he would seek to reveal 'the real meaning of the social organisation and customs of primitive peoples' to 'whites' who otherwise would continue 'unconsciously and unintentionally' to take from the Aborigines 'the meaning of existence.' This meaning was evident in the Aborigine's

mythology, ritual and sacred spots and objects, and very often it was just those things which white people, without meaning any harm, ignored or treated very lightly ... All that he held dear was being violated, and there was nothing left for him to live for.

Thus the psychological factor contributed to 'the tendency of primitive races to die out after coming into contact with white people.' Now that this was known,

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in their dealings with primitive races ... they (whites) should endeavour to treat the social organisation, laws and customs of these people as factors of great importance and to treat their offences, and indeed all their actions, as far as possible from their point of view, at the same time trying to give them a higher outlook.

However, the effort to educate Aborigines may not succeed. 'Personally', he said,

I am inclined to doubt whether they could adapt themselves to such altered conditions as European civilisation of the twentieth century presented to them. But while the blacks might not come up to our level, are we giving them the chance?

Elkin did not doubt the moral and spiritual obligation upon settlers to understand and engage the Aboriginal point of view, but he was not sanguine about the likely effect.

This glaring disconnect between purpose and prospect would become an urgent intellectual problem for Elkin – but in 1927 Elkin was determined to ignore it. For a third, more straightforwardly self-interested kind of obligation – a vocational obligation of the sort that Elkin's Thomas Beckett excelled in meeting – supervened.

The formal agenda of Elkin's field work, commissioned by the Professor of Anthropology, inaugural incumbent of the University of Sydney's new chair, was purely scientific. Professor A. R. Radcliffe-Brown engaged Elkin to conduct a survey of Aboriginal tribes in the Kimberleys, and to carry out intensive ethnographic research in the Drysdale River area. Radcliffe-Brown had studied with Rivers before the latter's rejection of evolutionary anthropology for diffusionism. Parting from Rivers, Radcliffe-Brown rejected diachronic perspective altogether, developing instead a synchronic structural mode of analysis.<sup>76</sup> His interest in race receded, but was not replaced by a scientific interest in culture contact in Australia. He had worked in the field in Australia once, in 1911, with Daisy Bates as his research assistant. Bates thereafter spent years living amongst Aborigines and living off her writings about the moral obligation Australians had to 'smooth the dying pillow'.<sup>77</sup> As

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<sup>76</sup> For its synchronic aspect in relation to Elkin's approach to anthropology, see Ch. 6; for its structural aspect in relation to Elkin's Idealism, see Ch. 7.

<sup>77</sup> Bates and Radcliffe-Brown had a strained relationship. She accused him of stealing her research. See Grant McCall 'Anthropology In Australia: Some Notes And A Few Queries', in *idem* (ed.), *Anthropology in Australia: Essays to Honour 50 years of Mankind* (Sydney: Anthropological Society of NSW, 1982), 96.

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Professor, Radcliffe-Brown declared moral judgments contrary to scientific purposes.<sup>78</sup> He agreed with Bates that the Aborigines were ‘a highly specialised variety of our species rapidly approaching extinction’, but that was not his professional concern.<sup>79</sup> When, aged 70, Elkin recalled his Kimberleys field work, he claimed that he had ‘no humanitarian interest’ in the clash of cultures. His task was the collection of data, ‘and to that task I stuck.’<sup>80</sup> In fact, Elkin’s disciplined approach to the data accompanied a morally urgent attitude towards the contact situation seen as a whole.

Elkin’s sense of purpose and his scientific mission were askew. He approached his enquiry into traditional culture scientifically detached, but morally and politically engaged. As he prepared for his work in the Kimberley, north-west Western Australia, he espoused diffusionist culture contact principles. He told a young reporter from the *West Australian* that anthropology could ‘help the higher races to give the lower those elements of culture which would enable them to rise in the scale [of civilisation].’<sup>81</sup> But his research agenda did not include Rivers’ question, *how* could those elements of culture be diffused without compromising the Indigenous culture?<sup>82</sup> If Elkin was to provide anthropological advice suited to Australian conditions, he would have to chart his own course.

The Chief Protector of Aborigines in Australia, A. O. Neville, introduced him to the material. In late October 1927, after almost three decades of struggle to win the powers that might make effective his efforts to bring justice and economic opportunity to Aborigines (on settler Australian terms), Neville gave Elkin an administrator’s perspective upon Aboriginal affairs in Western Australia. He assured Elkin of the hospitality of ‘his’ officers in the Kimberley – all but one of whom had prior loyalties, generally to the police force.<sup>83</sup> He doubtless promoted to Elkin the achievements, aims, and limiting conditions of his

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<sup>78</sup> Geoffrey Gray, ‘Dislocating the self, anthropological field work in the Kimberley, Western Australia, 1934–36’, *Aboriginal History* 2002, 26 (1), 23–50.

<sup>79</sup> AR Radcliffe-Browne, ‘Applied Anthropology’, *Report of ANZAAS*, 20 (Brisbane, 1930), 267–80; cited in DJ Mulvaney, ‘Australasian Anthropology and ANZAAS: “Strictly Scientific and Critical”’, in Roy Macleod, (ed.), *The Commonwealth of Science: ANZAAS and the Scientific Enterprise on Australasia 1888–1988* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1988), 204–216.

<sup>80</sup> Elkin ‘Australian Aboriginal and White Relations’, 212.

<sup>81</sup> Report in *The West Australian* 29 October, 1927. I owe this reference to Geoffrey Gray, ‘“Mr Neville did all in his power to assist me”’: A. P. Elkin, A. O. Neville and anthropological research in northwest Western Australia, 1927–28’, *Oceania* Sept 1997, 68 (1), 27–43.

<sup>82</sup> See Ch. 6.

<sup>83</sup> Peter Biskup, *Not Slaves, Not Citizens: The Aboriginal Problem in Western Australia, 1898–1954* (St Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1973), 73–5.

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administration. As Elkin would later emphasize, Neville had little executive power.<sup>84</sup> His Department of Native Affairs was a tiny, cash-strapped agency in a developing state oriented towards trade.

‘Government’ as experienced by Aborigines was mainly beyond Neville’s control. Police and pastoralists were responsible for the distribution of the bulk of government rations. Police enforced the settler regime; Aborigines in the north called them ‘the chaining horsemen’.<sup>85</sup> Neville’s ‘protection’ was implicated with dispossession and punishment. Exploitation of Aboriginal labour, and at least occasional violence against their persons continued. Some police – even some official protectors – believed Aborigines were beneath the law. When Elkin spoke with Neville, the latter had recently extracted, from a state Cabinet with a long record of preferring pastoralists’ interests to Aborigines’, funds to employ one departmental travelling inspector.<sup>86</sup> Neville thus lessened a little his dependence upon police for the implementation of his policies.<sup>87</sup> Nevertheless, the colonial government within which Neville had to work – characterised by arrest, abduction and even, probably, state-sponsored murder via ‘retaliatory expeditions’ – was intended to have and would have had symbolic and psychological effect far beyond Neville’s attempt at counter-influence.<sup>88</sup>

Within these constraints, Neville pursued three policy aims. He sought to protect remote tribal Aborigines so that they could gradually adjust their ways to white rule; ease such Aborigines’ transition into legal, industrial, and social settler systems; and relieve the destitution of those, mainly of mixed race, whom he judged could be sustained neither by traditional society nor by settler society. Convinced that rations, blankets, and institutionalisation provided no lasting response to destitution, he counter-productively perpetuated the attempt to ‘uplift’ half-caste Aboriginal children by forcibly removing them from their parents.<sup>89</sup> Child removal became a hallmark of his policy in the 1930s and 1940s,

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<sup>84</sup> Elkin, ‘A Policy for the Aborigines’, *Morpeth Review* III (25), October 1933, 29–35, at 29, 34.

<sup>85</sup> Jeremy Beckett, *Oceania* June 1938, 461.

<sup>86</sup> Biskup, *Not Slaves, Not Citizens*, 76–77.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>88</sup> Elkin ‘Australian Aboriginal and White Relations: A Personal Record’, *Journal and Proceedings of the Australian Historical Society*, 48 (3) 1962, 208–230, at 212–213.

<sup>89</sup> In 1915, when Neville became Chief Protector, the removal of half-caste children was an established policy. In 1919, Neville referred to ‘hundreds of cases’ of Aboriginal child removal that had occurred, probably since the turn of the century. See Robert Manne, ‘Aboriginal Child Removal and the Question of Genocide, 1900–1940’, in A. Dirk Moses (ed.), *Genocide and Settler Society: Frontier Violence and Stolen Children in Australian History* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2004), 217–243, at 222–223.



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but it is unlikely that Elkin knew of its beginnings when he spoke with Neville in October 1927.<sup>90</sup> Elkin was against the policy. When he encountered it at Forrest River Mission, it became one of his key allegations against the superintendent (Ch. 6).<sup>91</sup>

Neville's paternalism was most evident in his pursuit of the power to veto any Aborigine's prospective marriage, and to extend the scope of the category 'Aboriginal' for this purpose. His desire to control the progeny of mixed and half-caste unions was one reason Neville gave for his bid to control Aborigines' marriages; another was the need to protect tribal marriage customs from the interference of Missionaries. According to his testimony before the Moseley Commission in 1936, marriages arranged by Missionaries against native law were a frequent cause of warfare. But his concern was colonial peace, and not the integrity of Aboriginal law: on the same day he also told Moseley that Aboriginal law allowing polygamous marriage frequently resulted in elopements, followed by bloodshed. Neville proposed to eradicate polygamous marriage.

Neville also attempted to ease Aborigines' transition into the rule of settler law. When he spoke with Elkin in October 1927, he regarded himself as the first to advocate the incorporation of tribal law into special Native Courts in Australia, as the Murray administration had done in Papua.<sup>92</sup> Neville believed that Aborigines would welcome the reinforcement of their tribal authority through settler courts. That year, he argued before the Royal Commission on the constitution of the Commonwealth that natural justice and administrative wisdom both required a zone of syncretic law, linking Aboriginal understandings of crime to British process. At the same time, in Sydney the Association for the Protection of Native Races was pursuing a vague version of the same policy. From 1931, Elkin clarified and elaborated the APNR's position, and brought it closer to Neville's.

Neville also attempted to support Aborigines' participation in the settler economy. He expanded the policy he inherited of running government cattle stations – Moola Bulla was over one million acres – in order to train Aboriginal labour for the cattle industry.<sup>93</sup> Agreements with tribes living traditionally in the locality provided that a carcass was set

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<sup>90</sup> Gray, 'Mr Neville', 32.

<sup>91</sup> Report on Forrest River Mission, 1928, EP 1/12/96.

<sup>92</sup> Report of the Royal commissioner appointed to Investigate, Report, and Advise upon matters in relation to the condition and Treatment of Aborigines, Western Australian Parliamentary Proceedings (2), 1935. Commissioner, Henry Doyle Moseley. Hereafter, the Moseley Report. See pp. 74–77.

<sup>93</sup> Rowley, *The Destruction of Aboriginal Society*, 195, 253–54; Biskup, *Not Slaves, Not Citizens*, 87.

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aside for them weekly on the condition that they left the other cattle alone. Elkin observed that this worked well for both parties.<sup>94</sup> Less successful were Neville's repeated attempts to have Aborigines employed in Western Australia paid cash. When Elkin and Neville talked, his third attempt was before cabinet.<sup>95</sup> (It failed.) Neville would likely have introduced Elkin to the asymmetric competition between Aboriginal welfare and pastoralists' interest in Aboriginal labour.

Neville believed that Aborigines' advance required the rule of law, including on the frontier, and their independent participation in the cash economy. He saw Aborigines' citizenship as a goal that settler-colonial society could achieve some time in the future.<sup>96</sup> He sought to open settler-colonial society and economy more fully to the Aborigines for whose governance he was formally responsible.

Elkin saw his field work as having the incidental benefit that it would inform Neville's administration, which for many years he supported uncritically. In 1932, in his first policy statement, he specified 'training in stock-work, agriculture and various crafts' and 'a code of law and conduct applicable to a region of racial contact' as bases for Aboriginal advance. As peroration, he urged his readers to 'give the Chief Protectors the backing that they surely need'.<sup>97</sup> His thoughts in October 1927, a few days after first meeting Neville, were similar. Interviewed by a reporter from *The West Australian*, he praised the attempts Neville had made to equip Aborigines 'to reach our stage of development'. As he would five years later, he appealed to the general public to support the efforts of the administration: 'we can help [the Aborigines] to advance as I feel is being done by Mr A. O. Neville and his fellow workers in the Aborigines' Department in this State.' Elkin advocated paternalism to replace prejudice and indifference.

Geoffrey Gray has suggested there must have been a degree of ingratiating in the unqualified endorsement of the administration that Elkin gave in interview.<sup>98</sup> The thrust of Neville's administration was to encourage Aborigines' assimilation 'in spite of themselves,

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<sup>94</sup> Elkin, *Understanding the Australian Aborigine*, 24–26.

<sup>95</sup> Biskup, *Not Slaves, Not Citizens*, 77.

<sup>96</sup> Mosely Report, 637.

<sup>97</sup> Elkin, 'A Policy for the Aborigines', 33, 34, 35.

<sup>98</sup> Gray, 'Mr Neville', 32.

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for their sake and ours.’<sup>99</sup> Compare the colonial relationship Elkin hoped his fieldwork would enable :

... to treat the social organisation, laws and customs of these people as factors of great importance and to treat their offences, and indeed all their actions, as far as possible from their point of view, at the same time trying to give them a higher outlook.<sup>100</sup>

In backing Neville but also championing Aborigines' point of view, Elkin equivocated. He promoted an administration committed to the assimilation (indeed, eventually, biological absorption (Ch. 8)) of Aboriginal people regardless of their wishes; yet he advocated anthropology as the means whereby settler authority could respond to the Aboriginal perspective.

But this was not a sycophantic compromise. The already divergent tendencies in Elkin's thinking, combined with the difficulty of assessing Neville's policy when it was so thinly applied to such a vast and varied constituency, sufficiently explains Elkin's ambivalence. What was the Aboriginal 'point of view'? Was it a set of limiting conditions revealed by a study of their biology and culture, disabling them in the contact situation, and remediable through applied anthropology? As an anthropologist, was it his job to assist Neville realistically to fit policy to what he (Elkin) had recently described as 'the mental and social equipment of the people'? Elkin would have answered these questions in the affirmative – but with qualifications. But he also believed the anthropologist ought to derive understanding from dialogue with Aborigines, and thus build from their customs, towards a new autonomy in a new environment. Accordingly, in later years, as Neville found ways to assert his authoritarian liberalism more effectively upon Aboriginal people, Elkin responded with increasingly divergent policy proposals.

In retrospect, the journalist's interview with Elkin illustrates the problem of realistic attempts to lead opinion in an idealistic direction. The journalist – it may well have been Paul Hasluck, then working full-time at the *West Australian* and covering Aboriginal affairs –

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<sup>99</sup> Moseley report, 650.

<sup>100</sup> Interview, *The West Australian* 29 October, 1927, 18.

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described Elkin as a ‘keen anthropologist’.<sup>101</sup> He, or his sub-editor, used scandalous subheadings – ‘*Treated Like a Dog*’, ‘*Pathetic Desert Episode*’ – not drawn from Elkin’s comments. The headings did not reflect Elkin’s concern to highlight readers’ obligation to seek to understand Aborigines; nor did the prejudicial language that Elkin avoided (including in the direct quotations in the article), but that nevertheless characterised the passages that the journalist paraphrased (whites kill their sheep but blacks were forbidden to ‘and the poor primitive mind could not understand it’). Elkin’s attempts to lead public opinion were filtered through the very stereotypes he sought to replace, or at least complicate. The looming question for Elkin was whether to move one step ahead of the existing direction in public opinion, towards a more informed and humane management of inevitable racial doom, or to ask the public to look in a new direction, and set out upon a new path.

*The doomed race and the invisibility of Aboriginal choice*

Between the wars, it was unusual for even Australian anthropologists to discern a range of possible meanings and responses available to Aborigines, or to respect Aboriginal autonomy at all, in contact situations.<sup>102</sup> Professor Radcliffe-Brown had announced their impending doom. William Stanner emphasized Aborigines’ ‘fatalism’ and described Elkin’s idea that they should be involved in an acculturative process of assimilation as ‘stunning’.<sup>103</sup> The majority of commentators, including all the other administrators except Bleakley (Ch. 8) concurred. ‘Civilised’ Aborigines, even as they argued fervently that their ‘savage kin’ ought to be educated, sought to distance themselves from them.<sup>104</sup> In the 1920s, Australian public

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<sup>101</sup> Geoff Gray, who in the 1980s spoke with Hasluck about Elkin, considers it likely that, if Hasluck had conducted the 1927 interview, he would have mentioned it in the 1980s. Pers. comm.

<sup>102</sup> Writing in 1970, after a decade of intensive study of Aboriginal history and policy, CD Rowley wrote of ‘dispossession from the land, with a drastic change in the total ecology and in possibilities of land use for the Aboriginal through substitution of fauna, often to an extent which rendered largely irrelevant, in the time span of one generation in successive areas, the Aboriginal adaptations to the environment . . . . There was no settled “village” [as in PNG] within which innovations and adjustments could be worked out and the *autonomy* of the Aboriginal unit was rendered impossible.’ Rowley was then the foremost proponent of Aboriginal autonomy, but he saw it as discontinuous with traditional Aboriginal culture. See CD Rowley, *The Remote Aborigines: Aboriginal Policy and Practice III* (Canberra: Australia National University Press, 1971), 3.

<sup>103</sup> WEH Stanner, ‘The Aborigines’ (1938), in *White Man Got No Dreaming : Essays 1938-1973* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1979), 1–18, at 4–5.

<sup>104</sup> Attwood, *Rights for Aborigines*, 37.

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opinion barely registered the idea that Aborigines might have options, articulated with their own traditional culture, between which they could choose regarding settler civilisation.<sup>105</sup>

Certainly, as Elkin surveyed the Aborigines of the Kimberley, he was most aware of Aborigines' option *not* to engage with their invaders. Mutual ignorance seemed to strip the purpose and meaning from Aboriginal choices. The decision to offer a woman for sex was an act of limited autonomy if it yielded a child but no kinship obligation. British ignorance of and indifference to Aboriginal commercial and sexual mores converted this Aboriginal choice into European exploitation, Elkin argued.<sup>106</sup> Similarly, once Aborigines entered the British economy the weakness of their bargaining position drained their work, in Elkin's eyes, of its aspect of choice. When Elkin commented on Aboriginal labour he observed that it was '... very cheap. ... They earn all they get on these stations.'<sup>107</sup> To improve the situation, he did not talk about it to Aborigines, he focussed instead upon their employers' conduct.<sup>108</sup> Elkin was not alone in this. In 1930, the notion that 'full-blood' Aboriginal workers were entitled to wages, let alone award wages, was still radical.<sup>109</sup> Trade unions did not attempt to represent them until the 1940s.<sup>110</sup>

The Aboriginal choices regarding culture contact that were evident to Elkin, at this stage, tended towards segregation. The one piece of positive advice Elkin's diaries record him giving to Kimberley Aborigines he passed on at his last stop, La Grange Station. He 'encouraged them to continue their sacred ceremonies and to abide by their own laws and incidentally to keep their womenfolk from white, Malay and Japanese men.'<sup>111</sup> The advice seems ironic now that we know coastal Aborigines had a long history of incorporating into kin structures the children of unions between Aboriginal women and Malaysian men.<sup>112</sup> But Elkin in this respect seems to have subscribed ignorantly to the contemporary prejudice in favour of racial purity.

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<sup>105</sup> Mary Bennett (see Ch. 7) and Rev. JRB Love (see Ch. 6) are two of the exceptions.

<sup>106</sup> Elkin, *Understanding the Aborigine*, 17.

<sup>107</sup> Kimberley journal, cited in Wise, *Self-Made Anthropologist*, 55.

<sup>108</sup> Elkin, 'The Urgency of Anthropological work', 2, EP 5/3/3.

<sup>109</sup> Julia Martinez, 'The Limits of Solidarity: The North Australian Workers Union as Advocate of Aboriginal Assimilation', in Rowse, *Contesting Assimilation*, 101–118, at 114.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>111</sup> Elkin, Kimberley journal, cited in Wise, *Self-Made Anthropologist*, 71.

<sup>112</sup> Henry Reynolds, *North of Capricorn* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2003), 136–138.

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A comparable romanticism was evident in his admiration for the reticence of the 'Past-Master' who would not cheapen the secret life by divulging it too easily. Ask him about it, Elkin later recalled, 'and he will stare you out of countenance for minutes, which seem endless. He is trying to penetrate and sum up your character and motives before deciding whether or not to trust you with the tribe's dearest and life-giving possessions. From his NO there can be no appeal, not even the appeal of tobacco.'<sup>113</sup> He spoke thus at the University of Sydney's jubilee celebration, and the bathetic final phrase may have played to the prejudice of his audience, but the respectful tone prevailed. And in a written text there is no qualification of Elkin's regard for the negative choice some Aboriginal elders made. In contact situations, Elkin wrote, elders would watch the young men, and decide who if any were worthy of the secret law. Should they die without imparting it, 'they die triumphantly, having been loyal to their trust.'<sup>114</sup> At this stage, the only Aboriginal choice Elkin discerned was the noble or prudent decision not to engage with foreign cultures.

*Conclusion and prospect*

Immediately before beginning his field work Elkin had written that 'the psychological factor must be recognized'; and that anthropology, by discovering it, could 'help the higher races to give the lower those elements of culture which would enable them to rise in the scale [of civilization].' But in the letters and journal he wrote while in the Kimberleys, Elkin seems to have forgotten this statement of mission. He seems also to have seen no opening for Rivers' original formulation of 'the psychological factor', that it would be an 'interesting experiment to see how far it is possible ... to maintain the old interests and make them the foundation in [sic] which to build a culture which would not conflict with the ethical and social ideals of the people who have come to be their rulers.'<sup>115</sup>

Yet, these Idealist alternatives – and not the realistic prognosis of absorption and demise – defined Elkin's mature publicity. Their seed was evident in a report he wrote for the Anglican Board of Missions, criticising its man at Forrest River Mission. Why was it that at this stage Elkin espoused acculturative assimilation only for a Church audience? Our final

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<sup>113</sup> AP Elkin, 'The Emergence of Psychology, Anthropology and Education', in University of Sydney, *One Hundred Years of the Faculty of Arts* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1952), 21–41.

<sup>114</sup> AP Elkin, *The Australian Aborigines: How to Understand Them* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1938), 150.

<sup>115</sup> Rivers, 'The Psychological Factor', 107. We know Elkin was aware of that seminal essay of Rivers' because of the clippings he kept of ensuing debates (see Ch. 6).

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answer, and the next stage in our exploration of the tension between religious vitalism and Idealist morality, must wait until Chapters Six and Seven.

Next, we will survey the broader scientific context in which Elkin worked, and its relation to the religious review in which he published his first anthropological articles. The fatalistic attitude in which Elkin acquiesced in the field was scientifically and historically informed. Scholars from various disciplines agreed that Australian administrators were right to think that Aborigines would merge into a northern Australian population of mixed European, Asian, and Aboriginal blood. In writing up the practical implications of his research, Elkin avoided ‘sentimental’ (or Idealist) moralising. Citing physical anthropologists who drew upon Elliot Smith’s neurological findings, he accepted that the Aborigines’ demise as a distinct people was justified by the (allegedly) ‘real’ constant in human motivation, individual, material self-interest, supported and fulfilled within the democratic and racial nation. In so doing, he followed the example of Sir Grafton Elliot Smith – he who set on his desk at the London School of Economics a ‘genius jar’, in which his superlative Caucasian ‘supra-granular layer’, worth bottling, would be preserved for posterity.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> AP Elkin, ‘Elliot Smith and Diffusion of Culture’, in AP Elkin and NWG Macintosh, (eds.) *Sir Grafton Elliot Smith: The Man and his Work* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1974), 154.