

## Book Review Essay

### Anthropology's Homer: Michael Young's Malinowski

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**Michael W. Young.** *Malinowski: Odyssey of an Anthropologist 1884-1920*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004. Pp. xxx + 690, plates, maps, diagrams, index. US\$40.00 (Pb.), ISBN 0-300-10294-1.

This massive first volume of Michael Young's eagerly awaited biography of Malinowski covers just the first 35 years of his life up to 1920 when, having completed his fieldwork in Melanesia and married in Melbourne, he leaves Australia to return to England. That such a large volume can be written is in part due to the extent and quality of the archival sources on Malinowski's life that have survived. These include personal diaries that Malinowski kept off and on from an early age, extensive correspondence between family and friends and of course his field notes and drafts of books and articles. While much of this material is in the archives of the London School of Economics, other material is scattered across Europe, North America and Australia. Young has assiduously located sources and fashioned them into a comprehensive and highly readable account.

The first thing to understand is that Young's aim is not just to offer an intellectual account of Malinowski's life, but also to present readers with a 'literary biography' (xxiii). As such his account must be viewed as belonging to a genre recognised internationally as a special feature of English writing. So while Young seeks to explain 'why' and 'how' Malinowski became an anthropologist (p. xxi), his account is much larger in scope and detail than would be required simply to explain the process in purely 'history of science' terms. Instead Young provides a detailed account of Malinowski the man in the context of his times and therefore adds a great deal more to our understanding of this enigmatic and pivotal figure in the development of modern anthropology than would a simple, intellectual biography. The Malinowski that emerges is therefore a far richer, more complex and interesting—if at times no less likeable—character than the Malinowski anthropologists have learned to love and hate from accounts to date.

The highly personal and introspective nature of the diaries and of many of the letters reveal an intelligent, ambitious but also deeply troubled man. One does not need to be a

Freudian to see the classic complex created by an authoritarian and distant father who dies early and an indulgent, loving mother who commits her entire being to her only son's advancement. Predictably, this relationship deeply affected Malinowski's character and social relationships, particularly with women. His complicated amorous affairs—which Young examines in detail—often involved attempts to find a woman to match his mother, to be his intellectual equal and bear his children to ensure the continuity of his line. Malinowski's troubled search for such a woman were eventually realised in the person of Elsie Masson, the daughter of a Melbourne University professor. In the present volume the account of their 'marriage of minds' (p.586), as Young expresses it, is limited to the early period of their relationship. It is already clear, however, that his wife played, and would continue to play, an important part in Malinowski's development. This is confirmed by their correspondence, published a decade ago by their daughter Helena Wayne (1995).

Malinowski's need for a woman to balance his life was just part of his careful, and at times neurotic, attempt to fashion his own being. Throughout the biography there are constant references to what Malinowski described as his endless 'autoanalysis' and self-criticism (p.485). These resulted in attempts to control what he viewed as basic needs, driven by instinct and desire. His constant aim was to discipline himself into an ascetic routine of hard work and intellectual and bodily purity. These efforts resemble a strange mixture of a kind of Jesuitical Catholicism and Calvinist Protestantism that may well be connected to his Polish upbringing and his essentially Germanic education. Ostensibly a non-believer, Malinowski at one stage hints that his self-critical diaries were 'a secular substitute' (p.485) for the Catholic confessional. But Malinowski could also be irrationally jealous of rivals and surprisingly suspicious, constantly on the look out for omens and fearsome of dates, especially the 13th of the month!

In the first part of the book, Young carefully charts Malinowski's Polish upbringing, the complexities of his family life in a Poland divided by the three great powers, Germany, Austro-Hungary and Russia, and his association with the intellectual elite of his own generation. Of special importance in his development was his friendship with the deeply troubled artist, author and playwright Stanislaw Witkiewicz. Following the suicide of his fiancée, Witkiewicz travelled to Australia with Malinowski in 1914, intending to accompany him into the field. The First World War, however, intervened and Witkiewicz returned to Europe to fight on the Russian side. Short-sighted and unfit for war, Malinowski continued his researches in Melanesia. As a citizen of an enemy state, Malinowski was subject to certain restrictions but was never interned. Instead he was permitted to carry out research in Melanesia and indeed received financial assistance from the Australian government. The rest, as they say, is history.

Earlier, Malinowski's path to anthropology had taken him from Poland, via Germany to England. He arrived in England at a fortuitous time as anthropology had begun to shake off its amateur, nineteenth century musings. Malinowski soon became associated with all of the leading figures in British anthropology, from the armchair anthropologist Frazer who had provided the subject with a degree of intellectual respectability, to Haddon and Seligman who developed anthropology's academic standing and Rivers and Westermarck who honed its ideas and methods. Malinowski first worked on Australian Aboriginal material, then all the rage especially in connection with totemism. He soon left his mark, publishing works in English and Polish. Seligman became his most important patron and after considering field research in Sudan, Malinowski settled on Melanesia where Haddon, Seligman and Rivers had done pioneering research.

Young devotes almost a third of the book to Malinowski's ethnographic research in Melanesia which, with breaks back in Australia, extended from 1914 to 1918. Here Young

is undoubtedly at his best, not least because as he has conducted extensive ethnographic research in the region and has a deep understanding of the fieldwork experience for anthropologists. While Young's stated aim is to 'demystify' this period of Malinowski's life, his account is both sympathetic and deeply insightful. A number of Young's singular asides might themselves become classics. 'Good ethnography requires the alertness of every sense' (p.536), is but one of his many charming and artful comments.

Young admirably recreates the context of Malinowski's fieldwork presenting an endless cast of inadequate government officials, morose missionaries, traders of all kinds and nationalities and the occasional English aristocrat slowly drowning in whisky and his own squalor. Some of these characters are already known from Malinowski's published diaries, but Young provides much richer portraits. And then there are the Melanesians themselves who continually fascinate and infuriate Malinowski. 'Niggers' and 'niggs' prove not, as some have suggested, to be poor translations from his diaries of the Polish word for blackness. Such terms of course were part of the common argot of the colonial world, including Australia, and as Young shows they were used by Malinowski and his female correspondents in their English language letters. Sensibly, however, Young is careful not to adopt the moral tone so typical of many modern anthropological wowers and he takes this complex issue—like others—in his stride with honesty and understanding.

Our understanding of the development of Malinowski's creation of ethnographic texts is also greatly enhanced by Young's account. In recent times, often by claiming Malinowski as their patron saint, people such as James Clifford and others have conflated the writing of ethnographic texts with ethnography as a methodology and anthropology as a theoretical discipline. Young shows that during his research Malinowski was eager to capture a sense of place through literary description, intending later to incorporate these insights into his ethnographic texts. Malinowski was a skilled linguist and extremely well read in literature. He knew his Conrad and had even met his fellow Pole in England. Intriguingly, however, Young suggests on the basis of discussions between Malinowski and Elsie Masson, that Zola rather than Conrad might be considered a better source of influence on his literary focus and expression (p.479). Whatever the source, Malinowski made it clear that his literary flourishes were a means to an end, not an end in themselves. His own musings reveal how he was deeply committed to establishing a scientific, sociological anthropology that sought '*law* in the sense of the laws of physics and chemistry' (p.509).

With an eye no doubt to his next volume, Young highlights other aspects of Malinowski's thought that presage many of his ideas to come. After noting how in the field, separated from events in Europe, his friends in Australia and bereft of intellectual stimulus, Malinowski felt that 'time was annulled'. Young carefully links this ethnographic experience to Malinowski's future theoretical emphases:

It is arguable ... that the key to his epoch making ethnography and theoretical anthropology was a concept grounded in the dislocating experience of time suspended [in the field]. Synchrony was the atemporal condition—the very bedrock—of his functionalism. Time present, not time past, was of the essence in his here-and-now ethnography. Synchrony, not diachrony, provided the methodological purchase, the Archimedean point, for his descriptive exploration of social institutions. Functionalism subordinated history to sociology. So his sense of being out of time in the field surely enabled his understanding of the perfect scientific ethnography as one grounded empirically in the ethnographic present, a timeless sociological construct rather than a conjectural historical sequence. Malinowski himself would later claim that the 'functional method ...

was largely born in the field'. So it must be allowed that personal experience, too, led him to conceive of myth and history as ideological 'charters' for present-day social and political arrangements. (p.523)

I have quoted this passage at length to provide just a brief 'taste' of the quality of Young's ideas and prose, a masterful mixture of literary biography and intellectual history entirely appropriate to the point being made. Personally, I cannot wait to see what he makes of the rest of Malinowski's life.

## Reference

H. Wayne (ed.), 1995. *The Story of a Marriage: The Letters of Bronislaw Malinowski and Elsie Masson. Volume 1 1916-20, Volume 11 1920-35*. London and New York, NY: Routledge.