

CLIO'S FANCY: DOCUMENTS TO PIQUE THE HISTORICAL IMAGINATION

GATEKEEPER TO THE FIELD: E. W. P. CHINNERY AND
THE ETHNOGRAPHY OF THE NEW GUINEA MANDATE

Ethnographic prefaces commonly contain acknowledgements of those whose "hospitality and assistance" helped to make the research possible. Given the "my people" syndrome, one might assume that such debts were merely particular personal favors. What is "my people" to an anthropologist, however, is often one of many with whom such prefatory patrons may be concerned; and while the anthropologist may select the general area in which s/he works, the choice of a particular "my people"--even before more recent restrictions on access to the field--has often been in the hands of someone else. There have always, in short, been gatekeepers to the field--"men on the spot" whose particular positions in the "colonial situation" and practical regional ethnographic knowledge enabled them to oversee the aspiring anthropologist's entrance onto a particular ethnographic mise-en-scène. In cases where they dealt with a number of anthropologists, such gatekeepers may have played roles in the development of areal ethnography far beyond that suggested by a series of separate prefatory acknowledgements.

One such gatekeeper is E. W. P. Chinnery, who as Government Anthropologist in the Australian Mandated Territory from 1924-1932 supervised the entry into the New Guinea field of a series of anthropological notables, including Gregory Bateson, Beatrice Blackwood, Reo Fortune, Margaret Mead, and Camilla Wedgewood. Born in 1887 in Waterloo, Australia, Chinnery entered the Papuan administrative service in 1909. As Patrol Officer he succeeded in winning both the respect of the natives and the disapprobation of Governor Murray and many of the local European population. By 1915, he was sending ethnographic notes to Alfred Haddon, who as leader of the Torres Straits Expedition had established himself as doyen of the "Cambridge School." Coming to England for active service as Lieutenant in the Australian Flying Corps, Chinnery stayed for a year after the War as research student under Haddon. In 1920 he returned to the Southwest Pacific without completing a degree, and--barred by Murray from an appointment as Papuan Government Anthropologist--served several years as labor advisor to the New Guinea Copper Company, Ltd., before taking up an appointment as Government Anthropologist in the Mandated Territories. After eight years in that position, Chinnery went on to serve with distinction as the first Director of Native Affairs in New Guinea (1932-38). Following a major reorientation of Australian aboriginal policy in 1937-38, he was seconded in 1939 to head a new Department of Native Affairs "designed to introduce New Guinea methods to the Northern Territory."¹ At the expiration of his secondment in 1946, he was unsuccessful in gaining support to return to New Guinea as an anthropologist, and retired in 1947, serving on several occasions as advisor to the U.N. Trusteeship Council, before his death in 1972.

¹Australian Dictionary of Biography, vol. 7:1891-1939 (Melbourne University Press, 1979).

Chinnery's letters back to Haddon during his years as Government Anthropologist are interesting not only for the development of ethnography in New Guinea, but also for the light they cast on the practical problems of government anthropology, as experienced by a humane and talented person whose own significant contribution to ethnography might have been much greater had he not been so preoccupied with the day-to-day responsibilities of empire at close quarters.

The following selections from Chinnery's letters, which are preserved in the Haddon Papers in the University Library, Cambridge, England, are reproduced with the kind permission of the Library and of Chinnery's daughter, Mrs. Sheila Waters, of Black Rock, Victoria, Australia.

--G.W.S.

Rabaul, 12 Dec. 1924

Dear Doctor,

I am enjoying my work. So far it has been mostly advice on administrative questions. Our District Officers are men without training in native work but I am giving them instruction in ethnographical methods and am gradually organizing the collection of notes on various phases of native life. These when complete will be published by the Government in the form of bulletins or handbooks. It is proceeding slowly but surely. The Administrator is sympathetic; money is tight but he is doing all he can to facilitate my work. . . . Relatively little country is under control and a considerable amount of my work will take me into country at present hostile. In fact I shall have many opportunities of trying the ethnological method of bringing fighting men under control. If my Papuan luck continues I should get through without making myself a cushion for arrows. . . . A man named Ainsworth (late of Kenya) was here reporting on conditions for the Commonwealth Government. I read his report and I'm sorry to say he appears to have missed the fundamental things. In outlining a policy for native advancement I fear he has taken the relatively civilized natives of Kenya as his standard. Could you have sent to me any information regarding the administrative work that is being done among the Bushmen tribes or other backward peoples of Africa? It would be of tremendous value for purposes of comparison, and I would like to see what methods the Colonial Office uses for people in that stage of development. . . .

Rabaul, 10 April 1925

It is pretty depressing here at times. The Administrator reminds me occasionally that he only consented to my appointment on the understanding that I would prove myself an 'economic anthropologist' meaning I suppose that if I stir up any condition not pleasant to the present powers I'll become unpopular. The other day I presented him with some advice about a condition which is created under the present provisions

of the Native Labor Ordinance and which to my mind is detrimental to the welfare of the natives. In my letter calling attention to it I presented the gravity of the condition without any unnecessary frills and it did not please His Honor--in fact he 'regrets the letter.' I am replying to him and telling him that it is my duty to bring these matters before him. What is the use of having an experienced man who can see these conditions if he is to be muzzled every time he urges the removal of something that should be removed. Anyway I'm too keen about the work to be anyone's 'tame cat.' If there is anything wrong about the policy of administration it is my job to point out where it is wrong and how it can be adjusted. There is more than one thing wrong here and because others haven't the courage to risk a rebuff by pointing it out the wrongs remain. So there is a rocky road ahead of me but I've no doubt it will all come out right in the end. . . .You must have forgotten that I took the Diploma at the end of my first year at Cambridge. . . . Doesn't this permit me to try for the Ph.D.? If not could you arrange for my service here to be counted as fieldwork so that I may offer the material I am doing here either for the PhD or the MSc? . . . Bill Malcolm and all my friends are standing sedately in front of their degrees and I'm feeling rather in the cold, especially since I actually resided 4 terms and was allowed 2 for war service--to say nothing of the field work I've been doing ever since. However, do not let the matter worry you, Doctor. Of much greater importance is that book on Papua and New Guinea we are going to give the world. . . . Having no clerk I find myself going till midnight every night. All the reports of district officers are sent to me and I usually find passages in them calling for an advisory letter to the Administrator. A cadet system is being instituted and when the lads come up I shall give them a certain amount of time instructing them in the ethnography of the Territory, distributions, etc. and in ethnographical methods of district administration, investigation etc. And no doubt I will take some of them into the field to give them practical instruction in patrol work, etc.

Rabaul, 3 Dec. 1925

I have been instructing the various District Officers and have succeeded in creating an interest in the ethnographical side of their work which will bear fruit later not only in the collection of data but in practical administration. . . . In a couple of years I hope to have several keen magistrates working with a certain amount of method on our problems and between the whole lot of us we should cover a great deal of interesting ground. The administrator has been nice to me and if he will wait patiently for about twelve months more I shall have in print a mass of general material embracing the whole of the known part of the Territory.

Melbourne, 26 May 1926

I am glad you are going to send your research students here. I wish you would persuade the other English universities to do the same thing. Even in the areas under control there is an enormous field for intensive study. Some idea of this will be clear if you will look at the enclosed map, mark on it the spots where intensive work has been done and note the immense area either not done at all or merely scratched. Then

look at the overwhelming mass of country that is not even known. As most of my work will be done in the new country there will be little time or opportunity for really exhaustive study in any one area, but if researchers were placed here and there in the settled areas I could go straight ahead, opening up new country, making an ethnographic survey of its inhabitants and generally preparing the way for intensive workers. . . . Operations of this kind over a large area will mean that researchers will be able to get into contact with new people before they have been modified to any great extent by Europeans. My work will be of importance from an administrative point of view--it will enable me to gather quite a lot of ethnographical data, especially in social organization, it will bring the people of coast and bush together and stimulate the spread of pigeon English, and in a general way open up the path for careful investigation. Intensive work in new districts is of course impossible. In one hand are the articles of value to attract the natives and in the other the revolver in case he declines to be attracted by anything but the taking of life--the notebook can only appear at favorable intervals. Therefore owing to constant risk and worry there is little time or opportunity to go more than superficially into the lives of the people one is moving among. . . . But the fact that Thurnwald and Kirschbaum have worked for years in the Sepik and may publish their material at any time I would have gone to that district myself some time ago. . . . Taking this into consideration do you think Bateson should work there instead of one of the new and untouched fields that I shall set out later? If you do, you have only to discover what parts Thurnwald left untouched or investigated but superficially and I'll go up with Bateson and see him properly established in some suitable place, or if necessary stop with him for a few months until he is more or less acclimatized and until he has won the confidence of the natives. The chief drawback is the mosquitos. They are simply hellish (sorry to be so crude--no milder work is possible). Life in the villages is nearly intolerable, even for hardy old hands. Our district officers up there rarely last twelve months without a change. The natives are fighting off the river bank and sometimes on it. There would be some risk if Bateson went there alone. If we were together the hostility would not matter; we could probably turn it to advantage, for the most hostile of people can often be transformed to the firmest of friends. . . . Tell him I'll not interfere with his work in any way. There will be plenty for me to do in the swamps and waterways back from the river where all sorts of queer specimens of humanity are lurking, few of whom have ever been seen by even Thurnwald and Kirschbaum. Well, Doctor, you either select the spot or give Bateson a good idea of the sort of problems you want him to investigate and let him and me go into the matter of a district out here. Whatever you decide rest assured I shall do all I can for him. . . . I have given the new cadets that have been sent from Australia to be trained for D.O.'s a few lectures and instruction, and when I return to Rabaul I am going to take six of them out in the bush to give them a good all round grounding in various phases of the work.

Rabaul, 10 Dec. 1926

I have written Bateson advising him to leave the final choice of a working ground until we have discussed the matter here. . . . Saw

Radcliffe Brown in Sydney and hope to do some work for him before I return in February. Am going to ask Home & Territories to let me work with Brown until Sara is ready to return. There are maps to be done, distributions to be set out, lantern slides and prints to be made of all my material so that Sydney will be informed of what is happening in the Mandated Territory. Again I want to give Brown notes of all the unpublished material I have on Papua. If he is going to lecture on Papua . . . this material will be useful to him. . . . We can do with all the students you can send.

Rabaul, 15 Dec. 1927

My Waria trip was in the nature of an exploration. Some of it was not under control, intertribal fighting was rife, and as prospectors were extending in that direction the Administrator requested me to visit the district and introduce Government influence. I succeeded in making friends with the groups that were not under control and gathered a certain amount of data which I shall write into a report and publish while South. . . . This work does not give me time to work carefully on social organization but it brings me in touch with administrative problems of urgency and as I am rather lucky with 'new country work' it is wise I think to help the Government in such matters as much as I can. Officers with little experience in this work might easily lose their lives. The natives are rather difficult to handle and the initial contact with the Government means so much to the future progress of such people. You will understand therefore that my intensive work is being delayed for a time until these very important administrative problems are well in hand. It is of no advantage to me to be doing this work, [since] it is full of hardship and the risks are great (I feel them all the more now that I have four girl children to look after), but I hardly like to stand back when the Government is so much in need of experienced men for this work. . . . Am going south to the Hobart conference. Shall see Brown and have a long yarn with him. He is now taking our cadets. When they return the Government will appoint them Patrol Officers and they will advance in the magisterial service according to their work among the natives. . . . Bateson came in to see me and has now returned to the Baining. He is getting some very interesting results and I advised him to give you an outline of what he has been investigating. He is a clever lad and I think you will be pleased with his work. We all like him and enjoy the way he flays us. When the realities of life have touched him a bit more he will be a great man. At present he is only looking at it through an academic window as it were. His months among the Baining have done something to develop him. . . . I wish you would send all your research students out here and ask the other English universities to do the same thing. We could place 100 of them in different districts and at the end of two years merely 100 of our numerous tribes would be investigated. . . . What is the London School doing with its students? Perry should send one of his men to the Watut branch of the Markham. There lives a group of approx. several thousands speaking a Melanesian language and practising a most elaborate form of terraced irrigation involving the use of extensive aqueducts. . . .

Rabaul, 22 Nov. 1928

Fortune and his wife arrived and I did what I could for them before they departed for Manus. They have an interesting and easy people to work and should do well. I'll look after them. . . . Bateson has an infinitely harder job to tackle in the Baining-Sulka. He is returning to the Baining later. I have every confidence in him and I think he will find the Baining easier after his Sulka work. He looked very fit when I saw him last and was full of beans. . . . My long leave is due in October 1929--twelve months. Sara wants me to go to England and work with you. She will remain in Australia with the babies. I think I shall follow her advice. . . . First I want to complete the two terms necessary before I can proceed to a degree. Next I want to go over my N.G. material with you and arrange in order for publication the masses of stuff I have collected in Papua and Mandated Territory in case anything happens to me. Then I would like to discuss with you the joint work on N.G. we talked about while I was in Camb. Another reason is the enormous amount of work to be done here. As I want to make my next few years work as productive as possible I must have a long yarn with you and with other interested workers in England or Europe with the object of arranging a plan of work on more definite lines than I have been pursuing in the past. Although most of my time has been spent on administrative duties with little direct gain to anthropology I have accumulated an enormous number of disconnected data and have gained a good general knowledge of the conditions of the Territory both coastal and inland. A discussion with you and other interested friends will enable me to apply myself in future work to more useful and definite lines of study. . . . Perhaps in England I may be able to meet some of the League of Nations Mandatory members and officials from other Mandatory territories where native problems are not unlike those of N.G. I shall be able to make it at my own expense but at the same time I am going to try and get the H & T department to help me financially.

S. S. Marsina, 25 June 1929

Have written to Miss Blackwood as you suggested. It isn't really safe for women to work alone in this country but you may rest assured that I shall assist as far as I can anyone sent up. Dr. Powdermaker is doing well in N.I. She is at Lesu 80 miles down the E. Coast. Tell Malinowski she is happily established, is working hard, and is gathering interesting material. Bateson is on the Sepik. I have not heard from him since he arrived. Fortunes have finished and are on their way south. I think they are satisfied with their results. They have not told me anything about their work but I understand from Brown and yourself that it has been interesting. I did what I could for them and I think they felt pleased about it. Humphreys went up the Sepik a couple of months ago collecting. I haven't heard since but I suppose he has returned to Cambridge. . . . If any more lady anthropologists are thinking of coming out here you had better suggest that they bring a husband with them. I know of no place where a woman can work without fear of molestation from the natives. . . . Bateson thinks he is on the track of some interesting social material on the

Sepik. . . I hope when he returns he will have another go at the Bainings. With this general experience he ought to find them easier now. . . . From the administrative point of view the Baining problem is of far greater importance than say the Sepik and a successful study of the people would do much to enhance the value of anthropologists to Administration. If Bateson doesn't go on with it someone else will have to tackle it. . . . So far as our joint work is concerned I realize that you have too much to do already. I'll probably work it up myself someday.

Rabaul, 29 July 1929

The Fortunes have finished their work at Manus. . . . She worked in my office for a while, however, and told me something of their work. She also thought they would be coming back here some time in the future and I gave her the names of a few good places to choose from. . . . I have written to Brown applying for a fellowship from the Rockefeller Fund to enable me to visit authorities in America and England and also to study problems of Native labour and native administration in the Malay States and Java during my long leave. If Brown can arrange that I shall be able to put in some time at Cambridge but if he can't I'm afraid my long leave will be spent tucked away in some cheap boarding house in the south of England. . . . There are some big problems cropping up here especially in native labour, and during this trip (if Brown can arrange it) I want to absorb all the knowledge I can on questions dealing with depopulation and native administration in other countries. . . . Mrs. Fortune told me that under the Laura Spellman Fund (or a name similar) British anthropologists have been able to visit America, and I am hoping that something might be done under that fund if the other fails.

Sydney, 1 Jan. 1930

I shall be in London about the middle of May. Brown managed to get a Rockefeller travelling grant for me and after a month in New York I shall come on to England to give you all the news on arrival. . . . Bateson expects to leave the Sepik soon. . . . Dr. Powdermaker is doing very well in New Ireland. Beatrice Blackwood is in Buka passage and Speiser is in New Britain. . . . Brown and Camilla Wedgwood are both doing splendidly.

Rabaul, 25 Feb. 1931

I am leaving for Rabaul on 28 March and will be returning to Sydney in August 1932 to give the Presidential Address in Section F Australian & N.Z. Assn. . . . Brown sails for U.S.A. in May and he is arranging for Firth to succeed him. He told me the other day that [F. E.] Williams of Papua is an applicant for the Chair and he is not very pleased about it. It is not certain that Australia will be able to find money to carry on the Chair. My Administrator has already warned me to be ready to carry on with the training of the remaining cadets in case the Government

cannot afford to carry on with the Sydney training. I told Brown about it and it annoyed him a bit I think. He is under the impression that no one can train our Cadets to be successful Patrol Officers but himself or Firth.

Rabaul, 20 August 1931

I have finished the investigation [of the depopulation problem in New Ireland] and have advised the administration as to how it may be attacked in a practical way. Many of the causes are reducible by intensive medical treatment and infant welfare work and an important part of the programme will be in the introduction of new food plants and instruction in the villages in scientific methods of cultivation so that the same ground can be used over and over again, thus releasing women from the strain of shifting about in the mountains in search for virgin ground. . . . I made a great mistake in not remaining at Cambridge to take a degree. It would probably have given my advisory work the weight necessary to compell my seniors to take it more seriously. In far too many cases they have found themselves in the ditch I tried to keep them out of. However, I shall keep plodding ahead; patience will win in the end. . . . I have read William's book and enjoyed it. He is an infinitely better writer than I will ever be, but his book doesn't make the 'orokaiva' live as I saw him live. There was a time when I spoke and thought in 'orokaiva' and practically 'felt' in 'orokaiva' but I despair of ever being able to present that in print. . . . The Missions are trying desperately hard to have native marriage customs modified and they are especially keen in urging the Government to interfere by legislation with polygamy, divorce, marriages by arrangement &c. I have managed so far to induce the Government to leave such matters to the natives themselves and I am hoping that this attitude will be maintained. The position becomes rather stormy at times. Mission influence makes itself felt in many quarters, political and departmental, and one has to tread very cautiously at times. I rather like a fight though!

Rabaul, 3 Jan. 1932

I went over the New Ireland material again last year and as a result of my Report to the Admin & Medical Offices, an infant welfare nurse and an Agricultural Instructor are being established 100 miles from Kaviery on the E. coast road to see what can be done with the depopulation problems. It is now out of my hands and I am hoping that the experiment will be in good hands and that the officials conducting it will have a real scientific interest in the work. . . . A religious outbreak with anti-European possibilities occurred in the Ailap District and I am now there looking into the undercurrents. I think I have located the troubles and the district will go on as usual if modification be made in certain activities (Govt. and Mission). Shall report on this to Administrator. Meantime I have made a general survey of the peoples between Weviak Station and the Sepik boundary & the Schouten group, and will gather as much information as I can from the other tribes for the Aust. Assn. The Fortunes are working a day inland from a point one day's

walk along the coast from Weviak. There is good material there and the people will help them all they can. . . . I have not yet read Fortune's "Dobu" but I glanced through the article near the end on "Government and Sorcery." It is most unfortunate that he did not apply himself to this problem before breaking into print. Murray or Williams will no doubt point out sooner or later that the article does not even approach the root of the problem: it is not even a correct interpretation of the facts he uses. Both Malinowski & Fortune apparently ignore the fact that Trobriand and Dobu are mere pinpoints on the map of N.G. and that their observations may not be used with safety outside the pinpoints; that N.G. is inhabited by hundreds of groups differing from Trobriands & Dobu and from one another in type, language and culture. Because he finds the totemic of small importance in Dobu, the totemic clan generally is "an absurdly over-rated institution" (Malinowski in introduction (xxvii)). Because in Dobu he finds no communism . . . "Rivers' Melanesian Communism is a myth" (xxvii Introduction). Because of some system of relationship terms in the Trobriands & Dobu pinpoints, Rivers' theory of the effect of anomalous marriage on terms in an entirely different area is "far-fetched theory" (Introduction xxiii). I have found in Buin and other places in N.G. that the terms of relationship used by some individuals to designate certain persons related genealogically differ from the terms used by other individuals for persons similarly related, and in pedigrees taken some of the differences are explained by anomalous marriages now actually in operation. In New Hanover recently I found whole sets of relationships affected in this way. In one group the terminology was upset by the fruitful marriage of a man with his own daughter. . . . We require large numbers of genealogies in each group of people over a wide area before we can be dogmatic on the terminology of relationship. . . . I had to resign from the Institute when the exchange went up as I simply could not afford to keep going. My four children are at school South and every penny of my salary goes into the family needs. I feel it very much being away from them and would welcome a job in Europe, England or America which would enable me to be with them at least part of the year--collecting for a Museum or something like that--anything in fact. . . . The Schouten Islands will interest you. . . . Wogeo, the largest of the group, would be an excellent place for intensive study. . . . Wavy (black) hair--some almost straight. Mongol fold in eye but a perfectly straight nose--Standing stones (circles) and a very interesting mythology connected with the principal stones. Melanesian language, two moieties, Hawk and Flying fox. Matrilineal descent but patrilineal succession (to stones) and inheritance of property--Good climate and no mosquitos--about 600 people to examine. No missions. Masks, Bamboo Flute (initiation) Drums and Slit-Gongs--Ideal place for a newcomer to start. Island about 40 miles NE of Weviak Govt. Station.

Rabaul, 25 Sept. 1932

District Services and Native Affairs have been amalgamated and the Govt. has made me Director. So I must have convinced them there is something in anthropology. It is a big job and will keep me very busy until I get the organization running. Then I shall be able to put a few ideas into the District Administration. . . . I shall now be able to direct the D.O.'s into wide spread ethnographical surveys and exploration & as well

apply anthropological methods to the intensive administration. The title is Director of District Services and Native Affairs (and Government Anthropologist). . . . I am hoping to come to England when my pension is due to keep the terms for my degree. . . . From time to time I shall write and let you know how the work is going.

Rabaul, 30 Oct. 1932

Firth and I yarned about Camilla's work and decided that Manam Island off Potsdamhaven would be the best place. The Wauchopes (Humphries' friend) will take her there and give her all the assistance she will need. . . . As you know N.G. is awkward for a girl working alone and even in Rabaul there are risks from male natives. There is also a strong feeling about white women being alone in villages. The Wauchopes are nice people and they assure me Manam will be 'safe' for Camilla. They are going to find servants (man & wife) for her. I had thought of other places but the white women didn't like the idea of Camilla being alone in the villages and so finally on the advice of the Wauchopes I suggested Manam and Firth agreed with me. . . . The new job is a difficult one. Just at present I'm struggling to organize it, notwithstanding staff shortages, economy, &c and it is coming into being. Soon I shall be putting some ideas into the policy. It is going to be strenuous. The depression has made things bad for the European non-official population and there is now a movement afoot for legislation to permit corporal punishment. I wonder if Ernest [Haddon's son, who had served in East Africa] could get some data for me on corporal punishment in the Colonial Service. I'm going to fight against it tooth and nail. It is expected that a Legislative Council will be created here soon and I think the nonofficial member will probably introduce the measure. Three Europeans have lately been imprisoned for assaults on natives (natives afterwards died) and recently two natives killed Europeans who has assaulted them. Within the last couple of years two Europeans have been killed in uncontrolled country, one a miner, one a recruiter. We have a large area of 'new' country but owing to the need for economy our patrol staff is about nineteen short. So you see I am starting the new job under distinctly unfavorable conditions. However, we shall do it in time. Don't you think my appointment to this extremely important job is a compliment to anthropology? I feel as pleased as if I had been given a degree. The staff consists of seven (7) District officers, 18 Asst. D.O's, 34 Patrol Officers, 12 Cadets, 29 Clerks, Admstr. Director, District Inspector, Asst. D.I. and Director. About 20 of them have had instruction in the Sydney School. . . . My plans are to organize the Department so that I can spend a certain amount of time in the districts. . . . In addition I shall put certain trained officers on anthropological work of an administrative nature--such as depopulation inquiries--mapping out linguistic areas--distribution of cultures & material culture--and other things of importance--marriage customs, systems of inheritance &c &c. In a couple of years time I hope to be publishing reports contributed by officers. It will take time.
