

EXPEDITIONARY  
ANTHROPOLOGY

Teamwork, Travel and the 'Science of Man'

*Edited by*

*Martin Thomas and Amanda Harris*



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## **Methodology and History in Anthropology**

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Just as anthropology has had a significant influence on many other disciplines in recent years, so too have its methods been challenged by new intellectual and technical developments. This series is designed to offer a forum for debate on the interrelationship between anthropology and other academic fields but also on the challenge to anthropological methods of new intellectual and technological developments, and the role of anthropological thought in a general history of concepts.

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## DONALD THOMSON'S HYBRID EXPEDITIONS

### ANTHROPOLOGY, BIOLOGY AND NARRATIVE IN NORTHERN AUSTRALIA AND ENGLAND

*Saskia Beudel*

The days of great exploration in the sense of first discovery are now almost over. But exploration is not extinct. It has only changed its character. In future it will be intensive rather than extensive. What the pioneers accomplished in broad outline the explorers of the future will supplement in detail.

—Report of the Committee on the Future of the Society, 31 May 1939, Royal Geographical Society

In a tantalizing fragment of a letter written by the Australian anthropologist Donald Thomson to his mentor Alfred Cort Haddon, Thomson writes: 'I wonder whether I mentioned in my previous letter that many of the natives about Thursday Island not only remembered your visits, but were able to tell me quite a lot about you'. Thomson visited the area during his first periods of anthropological fieldwork conducted in northern Australia on the Cape York Peninsula between 1928 and 1933. 'I was greatly interested', he added, 'for of course we grew up with the name of the Cambridge Expedition'.<sup>1</sup> His reference to the 1898 Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to Torres Straits (henceforth 'Cambridge Expedition') is telling, not only for the glimpse it provides of the anthropological observer who is in turn observed, but also for the pervasive allure of the expeditionary form his comment evokes.

By the time of Thomson's Cape York fieldwork, begun during his mid twenties, he had long entertained a 'desire to join a scientific expedition to a remote region'.<sup>2</sup> In 1923 he sought advice on how to secure a position on the Hubert Wilkins Collecting Expedition sponsored by

the natural history section of the British Museum to collect mammals in northern Australia in response to fears about imminent indigenous Australian animal extinctions.<sup>3</sup> Wilkins was a romantic adventurer figure, with a history of polar travel and military service, and a background as photographer, cinematographer, geographer, war correspondent, climatologist and aviator. The British Museum also considered him a competent naturalist.<sup>4</sup> Over a two-and-a-half-year period spent mainly in tropical Australia, including Cape York, Wilkins collected plants, birds, insects, fish, minerals, fossils and Aboriginal artefacts in addition to mammals, and published an account of his expedition, *Undiscovered Australia* (1928). When Wilkins was advertising for expedition members, Thomson was in the second year of his biology degree at the University of Melbourne. He turned to the recently retired Sir Baldwin Spencer, who, like his peer Haddon, was a biologist-turned-anthropologist, for 'advice on how to secure a position' on the expedition. Spencer advised Thomson to complete his biology degree first.<sup>5</sup> Six years later, Thomson was accepted briefly onto the Australian and New Zealand Antarctic Expedition as a biologist, until the New Zealand government complained that the expedition party was comprised of too many Australians and not enough New Zealanders.<sup>6</sup> That Thomson applied to join the Antarctic expedition in the year following his first period of anthropological fieldwork demonstrates that the launch of his anthropological career did not foreclose his interest as a biologist in team-based exploration.

In addition to these specific overtures towards joining an expeditionary party, Thomson's biographer notes that during his student years Thomson was inspired by Robert Falcon Scott's Antarctic expeditions, and readied himself for similar undertakings by becoming a proficient photographer to augment his skills as a biologist.<sup>7</sup> He could be said, then, to have been living during this early period in a state of preparedness for exploration. He would later become known for his 'expeditionary zeal'.<sup>8</sup>

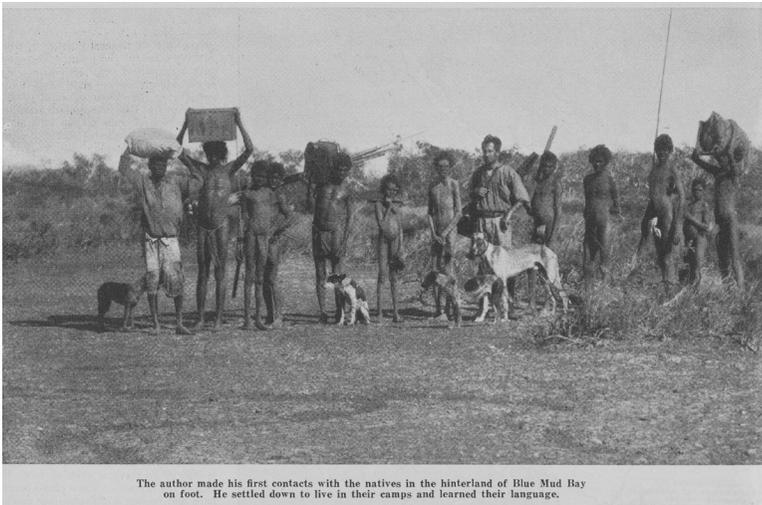
Thomson's invocation of the Cambridge Expedition as a significant presence during his youth also suggests useful ways to consider and position his expeditionary efforts in relation to broader histories of exploration and of professional anthropological fieldwork practices. Thomson's expeditions were undertaken as periods of anthropological fieldwork at three main locales across his lifetime: Cape York Peninsula (1928, 1929, 1932–33), Arnhem Land (1935, 1936–37) and Central Australia (1957, 1963, 1965). Although the stated aims of his research focused on anthropological enquiry, his trips involved a serious commitment to simultaneous pursuits including rigorous

zoological observation, data collection and interpretation resulting in fieldwork notes and scientific papers and publications; extensive ethnographic documentation through photography, film and sound recordings (technologies the Cambridge Expedition also employed); equally extensive acquisition of natural history specimens, Aboriginal art and artefacts, often gathered in the mode of a nineteenth-century natural history collector; and journalistic reportage on his activities. His voluminous collection of field notes, photographs, art, artefacts and specimens is now housed at Museum Victoria in Melbourne, and Thomson is highly regarded as a master photographer. His pictorial record is sought by descendants of people represented within it for the wealth of cultural information it contains,<sup>9</sup> and Museum Victoria curator Lindy Allen notes that Thomson's images are held in great esteem by Aboriginal people today.<sup>10</sup> However, his 'extra' pursuits put him out of step with influential anthropologists of his time and place, including his teacher A.R. Radcliffe-Brown. Thomson met Radcliffe-Brown when the latter was employed at the University of Sydney as foundation Professor of Anthropology (1925–31) where he established Australia's first university department dedicated to the discipline.<sup>11</sup>

When Thomson embarked on his anthropological career in the late 1920s, fieldwork conducted by a solo university-trained researcher at a particular site for a designated amount of time (often over a year), followed by a period of writing up and eventual publication of results, had become a standard professional practice and 'rite of passage' within the discipline (see Philp, this volume).<sup>12</sup> As historian Henrika Kuklick suggests, large team-based anthropological expeditions, such as the Cambridge Expedition (where each member brought a distinct form of expertise to a joint research project), belong to a late nineteenth-century moment of evolutionist anthropology. This model of team research, led and promoted by Haddon in an effort to elevate the scientific status of anthropology, brought British academics into the field at a time when the formerly clear demarcation between the collector in the field (James Frazer's 'man on the spot') and the interpreting, theorizing and synthesizing armchair scholar of legendary status was being reconfigured.<sup>13</sup> The Cambridge Expedition 'constituted a move toward the professionalization of anthropology' as a formal discipline and was significant for the challenge it mounted to the credibility of armchair scholarship.<sup>14</sup> It was soon superseded, however, by other developments in the field, most particularly anthropology's reliance on the method of participant observation and the concept of the immersed and empathetic solo fieldworker.

Thomson's persistently interdisciplinary approach raises the question of whether his anthropological expeditions can be understood as an extension and modification of practices formed through the Cambridge Expedition, which in turn were likely to have been modelled, according to George Stocking, on large maritime natural history expeditions.<sup>15</sup> The Cambridge Expedition was committed to fostering interdisciplinary knowledge systems that drew upon and integrated aspects of different disciplinary fields – namely anthropology and psychology. This chapter shows that, in Thomson's case, an interdisciplinary approach could be largely undertaken by a lone figure and thinker, rather than through either the kind of scientific teamwork that characterized the Cambridge Expedition, or the collaborative model that became typical in twentieth-century biological sciences.<sup>16</sup> We might think of Thomson as 'interdisciplinary in one mind'.<sup>17</sup>

Thomson's extra-anthropological pursuits also bore many of the hallmarks of earlier exploratory conventions more broadly – of the various practices associated with the field of exploration or the 'production and consumption of voyages and travels' referred to by Felix Driver as 'cultures of exploration'.<sup>18</sup> Firstly, in the early decades of the twentieth century when the notion of adventure was only spuriously associated with principles of rigorous scientific field research,<sup>19</sup> Thomson was unabashed in declaring through his journalism that 'high adventure' had 'given spice' to his 'scientific and exploratory expeditions' through territory 'unknown to the world and virtually unexplored'.<sup>20</sup> Secondly, he sought out and sustained a connection with the Royal Geographical Society (RGS) in London, delivering public lectures there in 1939 and 1952, publishing in the *Geographical Journal* and receiving the society's 'official blessing' for his 1957 and 1963 expeditions.<sup>21</sup> He was also a recipient of the society's Cuthbert Peek Grant in 1948 and a Patron's Medal in 1951. A number of scholars have demonstrated the ways in which the RGS played an instrumental role in shaping 'cultures of exploration' especially during the nineteenth century but also continuing into the early twentieth century, and it is notable that Thomson sought affiliation with this institution.<sup>22</sup> Thirdly, as mentioned above, he amassed collections of artefacts and specimens in a manner akin to earlier expeditionary natural history collecting practices. Fourthly, his activities in the field involved risk-taking and extreme feats of physical endurance and privation, which, as historian Dane Kennedy argues, 'were almost inescapable aspects of exploration'.<sup>23</sup> In Arnhem Land in 1935, to mention a single example, he undertook patrol journeys 'covering a total distance of more than 1000 miles', most of which were covered



**Figure 3.1** Photograph published in Donald F. Thomson, 'The Story of Arnhem Land', *Walkabout*, 1 August 1946, 8.

on foot, the rest with 'native canoes', pack horses and mules.<sup>24</sup> On occasion, he survived on seagull flesh, turtle eggs and hermit crabs, and he suffered fevers and dysentery. 'For days I could not walk, so had to crawl, for I had scarcely any skin on the soles of my feet', he wrote in the Australian travel magazine *Walkabout*.<sup>25</sup> He also experienced moments of heightened sensory perception and wellbeing, noting in *National Geographic Magazine* that specific ordeals would be succeeded by a feeling of tirelessness: 'difficulties were made to be laughed at; one could carry the world on one's back. While under the spell one is unconquerable'.<sup>26</sup> Such representations of endurance and physical prowess not only attest to the material conditions of his expeditions, but also emphasize the explorer's body as integral to his (usually his) reputation – either as a 'maker of ways' or as a form of 'scientific instrument' gleaned hard-won knowledge in the field.<sup>27</sup>

Lastly, the multiplicity of endeavours mentioned above is another of the key characteristics of the explorer as defined by recent historians and theorists of exploration. Through these endeavours, Thomson produced knowledge across numerous domains, while also publicizing, narrating and reporting extensively on his activities in the field. Kennedy observes that a number of nineteenth-century explorers struggled under the breadth of their duties in the field – surveying, measuring, observing, recording, collecting and reporting

across the nascent fields of geology, astronomy, meteorology, anthropology, botany, zoology and more, while also in many instances producing narrative accounts of their activities for general audiences.<sup>28</sup> Driver suggests that from the eighteenth century onwards, 'the idea of exploration was freighted with multiple and contested meanings, associated variously with science, literature, religion, commerce and empire'. So, too, the 'business of the scientific explorer was not always, or easily, distinguished from that of the literary *flâneur*, the missionary, the trader or the imperial pioneer';<sup>29</sup> or, in an Australian context, from the settler with 'speculative purposes'.<sup>30</sup> Rather than providing 'neat distinctions' between discourses of adventurous travel and scientific exploration, the undertakings of the explorer unsettle the 'frontier between them'.<sup>31</sup>

This chapter proposes that for Thomson the expedition was a flexible form that harked back to recognizable characteristics of 'cultures of exploration' – especially the contested multiplicity so fundamental to the idea of exploration – while also producing knowledge of particular peoples and environments in innovative ways. It allowed him to be always doing more than one thing at once – anthropology, zoology, photography, cinematography, collecting and journalism – which in turn facilitated his operation both within and apart from the conventions of functionalist anthropology dominant during his lifetime. The expedition enabled him to undertake an overarching form of interdisciplinary enquiry that considered people, nature and particular environments as interlinked rather than separate realms of concern, and provided an audience for his activities that reached beyond the strictly academic. In taking up these lines of enquiry, this chapter focuses on Thomson's Arnhem Land expeditions and the different layers of research, reporting and authorship he derived from these experiences. I focus on his formation of distinctive interdisciplinary anthropological fieldwork practices, influenced at least in part by Haddon's example, and on his cultivation of a public audience for his expeditionary activities through his association with the RGS and through his non-academic or journalistic writing.

### **In the Field**

Thomson was among the first small group of students to study under Radcliffe-Brown in Sydney and the first to graduate with a Diploma in Anthropology in 1927. Despite this lineage, Thomson 'liked to speak of himself as a student of Haddon's'.<sup>32</sup> He credited the work

of the Cambridge Expedition with showing 'the promise of Cape York Peninsula' as a fieldwork site, and Haddon supervised Thomson's research during the tenure of a Rockefeller Travelling Fellowship at Christ's College in Cambridge from 1938 to 1939.<sup>33</sup> They had already corresponded since at least 1934 and Haddon had assisted with the publication of two of Thomson's papers on Cape York in the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*.<sup>34</sup> Among his collection Haddon kept copies of, and made extensive notes on, Thomson's anthropological articles. He kept copies of Thomson's official Arnhem Land reports



**Figure 3.2** *Herald and Weekly Times*, 'Prof. [Professor] Donald Thomson' with family, 1936 (Herald and Weekly Times Limited portrait collection, State Library of Victoria, Accession no. H38849/4515).

and newspaper articles and sent Thomson his references to North Queensland from the final volume of his *Reports of the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to Torres Straits* (1935).<sup>35</sup> 'I appreciate your generous and kindly references to my own work in the notes you sent me', Thomson wrote in reply. In 1934, he expressed his hope to Haddon that he would soon 'get to England for further study and training', explaining that his imminent fieldwork in Arnhem Land would delay these plans.<sup>36</sup>

Thomson may have been drawn to Haddon as a supporter and mentor for prosaic reasons of personal connection. His father, Harry Thomson, was a Scottish-born musician who had moved to Australia from London. He knew Haddon and seems to have introduced Donald to him.<sup>37</sup> During Thomson's absence on his first Arnhem Land expedition, Harry Thomson corresponded with Haddon to 'help to keep my son's memory green', as he put it.<sup>38</sup> Both men 'stumbled into' anthropology from biology. When Haddon conducted zoological research in the Torres Strait Islands for almost a year in 1888 (a decade prior to the Cambridge Expedition), he began anthropological work as a sideline but found his attention increasingly drawn away from marine biology to the islands' human inhabitants.<sup>39</sup> Shortly after completing his biology degree, Thomson first applied for fieldwork funds from the anthropological research committee of the newly established Australian National Research Council (ANRC). His biographer suggests that he may have been motivated by his long-standing desire to take part in an expedition. Radcliffe-Brown replied, 'indicating that there was money available ... but that Thomson must first get some training [in anthropology]'.<sup>40</sup> Once in the field as anthropologists, Haddon and Thomson each carried 'schemes' they had learned from biology to their new profession.

Kuklick argues that Haddon employed a biogeographical approach to his anthropology, plotting 'variation along geographical axes, consistently understanding variations in life forms in ecological terms and observing that geographical isolation was an important factor in speciation'. He understood cultural variation as adaptation to environmental conditions.<sup>41</sup> Thomson too employed a biogeographical approach. He used it explicitly in his bird survey *Birds of Cape York Peninsula* (1935), identifying patterns on a landscape scale and delineating five zones made up of associated vegetation communities and faunal areas, along with gradations within the five main zones.<sup>42</sup> During his second expedition to Arnhem Land (1936–37), he collected soil and rock specimens for analysis, each related to 'definite types of country ... characterized by a distinctive type of floral

association' with a view to matching these with data obtained from aerial photographs to determine 'the distribution [of] the various types of country'.<sup>43</sup> He explained his methodology in relation to an almost completed article on Arnhem Land for the *Geographical Journal* in 1955 in these terms: 'I have tried to relate the account of ... the people themselves to the geographical background. In particular I am dealing with fishing techniques developed in adaptation to local geographic conditions'.<sup>44</sup> Attention to geography, its associated flora and fauna and other environmental characteristics also underpins his monograph *Economic Structure and the Ceremonial Exchange Cycle in Arnhem Land* (1949).

Thomson's deployment of a biogeographical approach in *Economic Structure* and in a series of articles on Arnhem Land in the *Geographical Journal* differs somewhat from Haddon's. Stocking argues that Haddon drew on his background as a biologist to construct an evolutionary approach concerned with 'the distribution of forms within a single geographical area' rather than with the 'documentation of a universal sequence of development'. Nevertheless, his published works, such as *Evolution in Art* (1895), employed evolutionary metaphors based on assumptions about 'the minds of savages', and also identified the supposed 'racial "tendencies" and cultural "stages"' that were characteristic of late nineteenth-century evolutionist anthropology.<sup>45</sup> Thomson was less concerned with locating a 'speciation' or 'ranking' of discrete customs, groups or material practices, for example in Arnhem Land, than with examining cultural practices grounded in relationship with distinctive material local conditions, often at the level of the micro-environment, and driven by complex networks of kinship, economic and ceremonial exchange obligations – 'intricate patterns of obligatory conduct', to use his words.<sup>46</sup> He was also at pains to portray the people of Arnhem Land as exemplary ecologists in their own right, and rigorously scientific in their environmental knowledge: they 'classify the country into "types" or formations as accurately as any ecologist, and they are able to state without hesitation what food supply, animal and vegetation, each association will yield' across an annual cycle divided into six defined periods of climatic variation.<sup>47</sup> Such statements aimed to underscore the sophistication and highly organized nature of Aboriginal knowledge in order to dispel assumptions about an apparently unstructured or aimless Aboriginal way of life.

It is worth turning here to differences between Thomson's methodologies, which integrated approaches from biology, ecology, biogeography and cultural anthropology, and those expounded by his teacher Radcliffe-Brown. Thomson's troubles with the ANRC have been

thoroughly documented and discussed: after receiving one ANRC grant to conduct fieldwork on Cape York, he resigned a second grant in 1929 due to disputes about the handling of funds and the contested ownership of his photographs taken during the first period of fieldwork. He would never apply for ANRC funds again.<sup>48</sup> This severance from a significant source of research funding, which forced a number of other Australian anthropologists who fell out with the ANRC to find alternative means of financial and professional survival,<sup>49</sup> may have compounded Thomson's interest in the expeditionary form. Mounting an expedition offered an alternative research revenue stream, even though it presented its own challenges. Support through a medley of financial backers had to be solicited and gained, and 'expedition work' was, Thomson admitted, 'so costly'.<sup>50</sup> It is not the place of this chapter to retell the story of Thomson's relations with the ANRC, except to examine one thread of its consequences: the exposure of tensions between Radcliffe-Brown's views on properly scientific anthropological fieldwork and Thomson's own. During an exchange of opinions between ANRC Executive Committee members, Radcliffe-Brown accused Thomson of dedicating too much time to 'some extraneous subject', meaning photography, which was not a 'satisfactory use of the funds'. Radcliffe-Brown declared that Thomson was not

wholeheartedly a scientist ... [he] said when he first came [to Sydney] that his real interest is exploring the bush, what he really wanted [to do] was natural history observation ... I always had the feeling that Thomson is perhaps not so much a scientist as rather a person who is fond of the bush – a good field naturalist, but who looks upon his journey not so much as a scientific expedition as a journalistic expedition.<sup>51</sup>

A.P. Elkin, who succeeded Radcliffe-Brown as Professor of Anthropology at the University of Sydney from 1933 to 1956, and with whom Thomson had conflicted relations, would also write disparagingly of Thomson as 'a medley of zoologist, anthropologist and journalist'.<sup>52</sup>

That Radcliffe-Brown's comments on Thomson's plural activities cordon off photography and journalism from 'wholehearted' scientific enquiry is hardly surprising during a period of anthropology's development when writing for a public audience diminished academic authority and credibility. During the discipline's earlier incarnations, anthropologists had expected to relay their findings and activities to the public.<sup>53</sup> Like most academic disciplines, increasing specialization brought some 'closure' in public communication. As Peter Weingart argues, 'the essence of discipline formation and evolution

is self-referential communication' represented by specialized journals, forums, scholarly associations and peer review processes.<sup>54</sup> Thomson's voluminous journalistic output, amounting to over nine hundred articles, most of them generously illustrated with his photographs, was unorthodox, and Radcliffe-Brown seems to have assumed that communication of scientific exploration to the public precluded scientific rigour.

What is perhaps more surprising about Radcliffe-Brown's comments is his suggestion that natural history observation was as 'unscientific' as journalism, love of the bush and photography. In the context of arguments over what kind of anthropology and what kind of scientific fieldwork was worthy of funding, natural history was cast in disparaging terms. Felix Driver, Lynn Nyhart and Robert Kohler have all cautioned against 'summary version[s] of historical shifts in the nature of scientific investigation' that argue that a 'natural history' model of science was superseded by experimental laboratory sciences of the twentieth century.<sup>55</sup> Although natural history's status, dominance, techniques and institutional and disciplinary frameworks shifted markedly, it persisted in various guises in the twentieth century. According to Driver, its key imperatives of mapping, fieldwork and inventory remain 'central to the pursuit of modern science'.<sup>56</sup> Following these lines of argument, Thomson is a clear example of a university-trained scientist who deliberately sustained a 'natural history' mode of enquiry well into the twentieth century.

Thomson was as capable of laboratory science as he was of natural history fieldwork with its methods of survey, reconnaissance and data and specimen collecting. From 1929 he worked on antivenins at the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute of Research in Pathology and Medicine in Melbourne, and in 1932 he became a research fellow in the Department of Anatomy at the University of Melbourne. We can assume that there were good reasons for his commitment to natural history, rather than want of other forms of scientific expertise. Early in his career he argued clearly for the incorporation of 'natural history' enquiry within anthropological research: 'I am of the opinion that, for the ethnographer, especially in Australia where the relation between man and nature is a peculiar and specialized one, an intimate knowledge of the natural history of the area in which he is working is essential to an understanding of the totemic beliefs of the people, and therefore should form a part of the problem presented by a study of the Aboriginal'.<sup>57</sup> He sometimes referred to his zoological research as 'natural history' but seemed to imply, in his use of the term, both a broadly 'ecological' approach that considered interrelationships

between life forms and the places they inhabit (one 'concerned with relation, interdependence, and holism' to use Donald Worster's broad definition)<sup>58</sup> and, more particularly, an approach aligned with the concept of biogeography and floral and faunal 'association zones', as discussed earlier. In his journalism, he used the term 'natural history' much in its vernacular sense as the study and description of natural objects, plants and animals of a particular place, conveyed with passion and enthusiasm. Despite Thomson's credentials as a 'hard scientist'<sup>59</sup> (as opposed to a social scientist), his expertise in the fields of biology and natural history and his interdisciplinarity diminished his credibility as an anthropologist in the estimation of Radcliffe-Brown and Elkin.

Functionalist anthropology, within which Radcliffe-Brown was, to use Stocking's term, a 'culminating figure', has been strongly critiqued for creating oversimplified models of supposedly fundamental social processes.<sup>60</sup> As Kuklick has suggested, functionalists assumed that 'they could determine and describe pre-contact conditions . . . Virtually abstracted from the vagaries of actual historical experiences, their subjects' pasts were rendered as expressions of the structured possibilities permitted by persistent social systems'.<sup>61</sup> Geography and environment were stripped from these imaginings of sealed-off, pre-colonial social orders to the extent that the field site 'became cultural rather than physical space'. The remedy, Kuklick argues further, to this widely criticized and deficient model has been to pay 'renewed attention to the factors of geography and history that were so important to Haddon' (and to W.H.R. Rivers).<sup>62</sup>

It is not surprising, then, that within the culture of functionalist anthropology that dominated the field from the 1920s, Thomson turned to Haddon as a supporter, even though the latter's influence as a mentor and teacher had waned since its 'zenith' from 1901 to 1925.<sup>63</sup> Thomson did use functionalist frameworks to a certain degree, especially in relation to kinship study, and even turned to Radcliffe-Brown in the late 1940s for advice on these matters.<sup>64</sup> Nevertheless, his shared background in natural sciences and his congenial relations with Haddon must have bolstered his efforts to integrate biological concepts and findings with anthropological conceptual paradigms at a time when it was not easy to do so within the local anthropological establishment. We might understand Thomson as having taken Haddon's commitment to interdisciplinary approaches to anthropological research to heart – as did a number of his other earlier students.<sup>65</sup> Haddon observed that a 'proper anthropologist' required 'wider knowledge and more versatile talents' than lay within any one

person's capacities: they should be 'a linguist, artist, musician and have an extensive knowledge of natural and mechanical science', to which list he later added psychology, physiology and sociology.<sup>66</sup>

Recent theorists of interdisciplinarity have observed the profusion of potentially confusing or overlapping terms describing interdisciplinary research and scholarship. In her taxonomy of interdisciplinarity, Julie Thompson Klein suggests that 'integration' of disciplines is a defining characteristic of interdisciplinarity. Klein contrasts this with 'multidisciplinarity' that juxtaposes disciplines while retaining the discrete identity of each, so that 'the existing structure of knowledge is not questioned'.<sup>67</sup> In the field of global environmental change studies (or Global Change Research), an area currently drawing urgent attention to notions of interdisciplinarity, Poul Holm et al. argue that interdisciplinary research 'tends to challenge both the disciplinary boundaries and the dominating paradigms' within particular disciplines. Ideally, traditions and paradigms of any given field are transcended to acquire 'new epistemological frameworks and methodological practices that exceed any one discipline'.<sup>68</sup> I follow these distinctions here: the Cambridge Expedition aimed not only to bring distinct disciplines to a common research project, but to create 'common ground' for the disciplines of anthropology and psychology, 'drawing them closer together and enlarging the comparative dimension of each'.<sup>69</sup> This was expressed by Haddon as a 'long felt' expectation 'that psychological investigations must be undertaken before any real advance could be made in ethnology'.<sup>70</sup>

In contrast to Haddon, whose work is associated with the consolidation of anthropology as a professional discipline, Thomson was operating within an increasingly specialized field, with cultural anthropology now firmly aligned with the social sciences and not the natural sciences (sciences and social sciences being two of the 'three cultures' that structure the modern university, identified by Jerome Kagan since C.P. Snow's renowned 1959 Rede Lecture articulation of the polarized 'two cultures' of the arts and sciences).<sup>71</sup> Thomson's work in Arnhem Land began as an applied anthropology project in the wake of killings of non-Aboriginal people in the area, where he was entrusted with a peacekeeping and mediatory role by the Commonwealth government. He referred to this undertaking explicitly as an 'expedition' and the expeditionary form seems to have given Thomson enough flexibility and independence from the dominant conceptual paradigms of functionalist anthropology for him to maintain unfashionably heterogeneous activities in the field. His interdisciplinary understanding of Aboriginal knowledge systems as

an articulation of local biophysical environments and social, material and cultural systems, developed through close 'attune[ment] over time to these environments', can be understood to have anticipated research paradigms within the fields of cultural ecology of the 1950s and ecological anthropology of the 1960s.<sup>72</sup> His work predates Julian Steward's *Theory of Culture Change* (1955), for example, which is commonly associated with the founding of cultural ecology.<sup>73</sup> The area of global environmental change studies recognizes these fields, which fuse findings from the fields of both biology and anthropology, as early responses to the challenge of initiating a sustained interrogation of human–environment interactions – a challenge not taken up until the 1970s in other social sciences.<sup>74</sup> Thomson's work can be viewed as a pioneering effort in this direction.

### In the Metropole

Frank Debenham, the first Professor of Geography at Cambridge University and a fellow of the RGS, had been the geologist and cartographer on Scott's last British Antarctic expedition (1910–13). In June 1938, he wrote Thomson a letter of introduction to Arthur Hinks, mapmaker and secretary of the RGS, and editor of the *Geographical Journal*. Debenham, a fellow Australian, hoped that the society might publish some of Thomson's work, and requested Hinks' cartographic assistance with drawing up maps of Arnhem Land.<sup>75</sup> Thomson's own letter explained that very little was known geographically about his field site, where he had 'encountered many unnamed and uncharted rivers'.<sup>76</sup> By this time based in Cambridge on a Rockefeller Travelling Fellowship, he was anxious to know if anything could be done with his sketch maps. 'We should be glad ... to see your map material and oblique [aerial] photographs and discuss how they can be worked up', Hinks replied.<sup>77</sup>

In May the following year, Thomson gave a lecture at the RGS on his 'Journeys in Arnhem Land', accompanied by film footage portraying the 'tree-dwelling Djinba clan' in the Arafura swamps.<sup>78</sup> It would be a decade though, with the war intervening, before the appearance of his lecture material as a three-part series in the *Geographical Journal* (1948–49). On Christmas eve 1947, prior to the first article's publication, Thomson wrote with alarm to G.R. Crone, librarian and map curator at the RGS, expressing his dismay at news of the impending American-Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land (supported by the National Geographic Society, the Smithsonian

Institution and the Commonwealth of Australia) (see chapters by Thomas and Harris and Harris, this volume). Anxious about his own account of research in this area, he argued the case to 'expedite publication in view of the pending American expedition to this territory'.

I feel that this is more than necessary because of claims now being made in the Australian press, as part of the advance publicity for the American expedition, that Arnhem Land is still unexplored, whereas I myself spent in all some three and a half years in the Territory ... I am the only Australian who knows this territory and its people well and feel that it would be a pity to wait any longer for additions to the maps before getting the account printed. This is the last large area in Australia that remained unexplored.<sup>79</sup>

Crone replied, reassuring Thomson that the society would publish the paper as soon as they received it. 'You can rest assured that we appreciate the importance of this work and the necessity to forestall any publication by the proposed American expedition'.<sup>80</sup> To these ends, a notice was placed in the *Geographical Journal* outlining the extent of Thomson's 'research mission' in Arnhem Land and crediting him with 'the discovery of the great Arafura swamp, many rivers, and portions of the coastline' for which, along with his 'anthropological discoveries', he had just been awarded the society's Cuthbert Peek Grant.<sup>81</sup> The first of Thomson's articles appeared in the next issue of the journal; his 'An Arnhem Land Adventure' went into print in the *National Geographic Magazine* the same year. A few days after writing to Crone, an article by Thomson appeared in the *Brisbane Courier-Mail* announcing the impending arrival of the 'American expedition', outlining its aims and pointing out the 'many long journeys of exploration' already undertaken in Arnhem Land (his own). 'Why are Australians willing to leave to others the final exploration of the last of their frontiers?' he asked.<sup>82</sup>

Clearly, claims of opening up 'final frontiers' mattered a great deal to Thomson. By way of comparison, the anthropologists Ronald and Catherine Berndt were also concerned about reports of the 'expedition by the National Geographic Society', and published an article titled 'Arnhem Land Is Far from Unknown' in the *Adelaide Advertiser*, debunking myths that 'Arnhem Land is a glamorous, exotic, unexplored and dangerous land'.<sup>83</sup> As students of Elkin, the notion of the expedition was suspect to them, just as it was to their mentor. '[I] took an expedition which I normally severely refrain from doing', Elkin wrote of his own field trip to southern Arnhem Land in 1949.<sup>84</sup> In his newspaper and magazine articles, Thomson placed far more emphasis on a locale 'shunned by the white man' than the Berndts. Throughout

Australia's settlement history, it had been 'a vast untamed No Man's Land', he claimed.<sup>85</sup> As an anthropologist, he was acutely aware, of course, that this supposed wilderness was an intimately known home to the people he hoped to study. As a seasoned journalist, he realized the narrative potential of his expeditions and was able to create his own copy relaying his experiences. Thomson's Arnhem Land expeditions also received the attention of the popular press, which charted the preparations for and launch of his journeys, covered controversies surrounding his selection for the government commission, and made announcements when he was assumed missing. A single example serves here to convey how his activities were represented in the public domain. Ernestine Hill, a high-profile journalist and popular author



**Figure 3.3** 'Portrait of Dr. Donald Thomson', circa 1937. Unknown photographer. By permission of the National Library of Australia (G.M. Mathews Collection of Portraits of Ornithologists, nla.pic-vn3799007).

renowned for her sensationalist promotion of the untapped economic potential of Australia's 'magnificent empty lands', described Thomson as a 'keen, wiry young man in the early 30s, ready to endure any hardships and to face any dangers in his thirst for knowledge'. He would live alone, she wrote, on 'one of the few coasts in the world that have totally missed civilisation'.<sup>86</sup>

Thomson's own articles on his Arnhem Land activities can be broken roughly into two groups: those produced during or shortly after the completion of the two expeditions in 1935 and 1936–37 and published in a wide variety of newspapers including the *London Times*, the *Melbourne Herald and Argus*, the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the *Adelaide Advertiser*, the *Brisbane Courier-Mail*, the *Queenslander* and *Sydney Mail*; and those produced in the postwar period including his articles in *Walkabout*, the *Geographical Journal* and the *National Geographic Magazine* mentioned earlier. It is difficult to say for certain why Thomson was drawn to publish so extensively in the popular and non-academic press. It could possibly have been for extra income, although he was employed by the University of Melbourne for most of his career, from 1932 onwards. Or it could be that his style of writing lent itself to a wider readership. Even his official government reports – *Interim General Report of Preliminary Expedition to Arnhem Land, Northern Territory of Australia 1935–36* (1936) and *Report on Expedition to Arnhem Land, 1936–37* (1939) – make for surprisingly vivid and compelling reading. Thomson submitted the reports to the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland for the Wellcome Medal for applied anthropology, which he won in 1939. One of the judges commented on the thrilling nature of Thomson's narratives: 'Here you have . . . a story, wonderfully told, of adventure. I have seldom read a story which, as this essay does, tells of high courage, fortitude and determination as is related in this extraordinarily interesting, and indeed thrilling, account'.<sup>87</sup>

Thomson drew on the material contained within these reports and in his expedition journals, recycling the 'most remarkable experiences' of his travels across a number of articles, often reusing portions of text verbatim. Here, perhaps, was a way to garner recognition, accolades and support for his intrepid activities on a last frontier; to write, also, of distinctive natural history phenomena in little-known terrain; to draw attention to the plight of a people whose culture he was sure was on the brink of destruction; and to take pleasure in communication through his literary flair.

With the RGS's long history of negotiating the unsettled terrain between discourses of adventurous travel and scientific exploration, it

is not surprising that Thomson turned to it as a platform for disseminating accounts of his travels, research findings and adventurous exploits, without one discourse necessarily nullifying the other. Felix Driver argues persuasively that since its inception in 1830, the RGS was, above all, a hybrid and heterogeneous institution – ‘part social club, part learned society, part imperial information exchange and part platform for the promotion of sensational feats of exploration’. In the mid Victorian years it endeavoured to perform two roles simultaneously, and often irreconcilably: ‘to acquire the status of a scientific society and to provide a public forum for the celebration of a new age of exploration’.<sup>88</sup> The society’s history, suggests Driver, can be understood through a sequence of differences over its role and purpose, and about the contested nature of scientific knowledge when coupled with a ‘craving for sensation’.<sup>89</sup> Nevertheless, it played a pivotal role during the nineteenth century in supporting and promoting exploration, and in setting parameters for how explorers should perform and behave in the field. Nicola J. Thomas and Jude Hill observe that the RGS maintained its influence at the turn of the century during a perceived crisis surrounding the future of exploration by promoting the challenges of those areas of the globe that were ‘still unknown’.<sup>90</sup>

In 1938 the question of the future of exploration was again raised. Thomson contacted the RGS at a time when the society was going through a process of self-examination over its relevance to ‘the times’.<sup>91</sup> In a memorandum to the RGS Council, Dudley Stamp wrote: ‘Since its inception over one hundred years ago the Society has been concerned especially with Travel and Exploration. So much has been accomplished in the last century that this particular field of geographical work is of necessity one of ever increasing restriction’.<sup>92</sup> His provocations as a professional geographer, then based at the London School of Economics where he held a readership in economic geography, precipitated the appointment of a committee to consider the ‘future, organisation, and work of the Society’. The committee’s findings acknowledged that the work of exploring the ‘still unknown’ was now largely complete. However, instead of conceding that the age of exploration might now, finally, be over, the committee responded with the statement quoted at this chapter’s head: it envisaged and encouraged a future of intensive rather than extensive exploration, providing practical and modest financial support towards its realization. Thomson’s ‘discoveries’ of particular waterways, swamps and coastal areas are a clear instance of ‘intensive exploration’. Rather than traversing large amounts of territory in the form of a linear projection that ‘sampled’ terrain in a way more typical of nineteenth-century

exploration,<sup>93</sup> he gathered detailed local knowledge recursively within a circumscribed area.

Nicolas Peterson and Geoffrey Gray both argue that in the postwar period Thomson became increasingly isolated from the Australian anthropological establishment with its stronghold under Elkin at the University of Sydney, which remained the only Department of Anthropology in Australia until 1950. Thomson was the only anthropologist at the University of Melbourne. In 1948 Thomson wrote: 'it is rather difficult to stand and to work quite alone here – and of course it means no recognition for one's work except overseas – and I have always known that it [is] that that matters anyway'.<sup>94</sup> He was offered a lectureship at Cambridge, which he declined, during this period, and was awarded the Rivers memorial medal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland in 1952. His connections to the RGS were also important in this regard. As noted, through the society's journal and lecture series, Thomson could integrate film, photography, personal accounts of travel including the joys and challenges of adventurous exploration and of scientific discovery as a matter of course, given the society's long history of fusing these diverse genres, modes of address and media. He could thereby reach a wider audience than that available at home in strictly anthropological circles. Furthermore, as his alarm about competing claims to opening up 'unexplored' territory makes clear, both his journalism and his relationship with the RGS provided a way to shape a reputation as a 'last explorer' and to reap any associated rewards – such as the society's medals and public acclaim. These rewards may have gone some way towards compensating him for the lack of wider recognition.

### **A Curious Expeditionary**

Although there was much that was orthodox about Thomson's evocation of the expeditionary form – the emphasis on romantic adventure and heroic feats of endurance – the expedition also provided a flexible form of scientific travel during a period of twentieth-century disciplinary specialization in the field of anthropology, as this chapter has shown. On the ground in Arnhem Land, Thomson made use of his expeditions to develop idiosyncratic fieldwork methodologies. He drew an important distinction between the coast of Arnhem Land and the inland. In 1935 he undertook lengthy overland journeys on foot as part of a larger strategy to 'demonstrate to the natives that the white man is not helpless away from his boat [and] to impress upon

them the fact that he has the strength and resourcefulness necessary to make long journeys through their country, and that he is able to live as they live'.<sup>95</sup> This was a way to win trust and respect, and to ensure he did not transgress strict forms of etiquette to do with entry to particular peoples' land or camps. To these ends, Thomson stripped away 'almost all the white man's usual impedimenta [*sic*]', sometimes carrying only a toothbrush and sheath knife, and sharing in all daily activities as far as possible – disposing even of that legendary locus of retreat, the 'ethnographer's tent'.

Thomson's adoption of a peripatetic Aboriginal lifestyle ups the ante on anthropology's long-held ambition to establish rapport, dating back to Haddon's foundational pronouncement that it is essential to understand 'native actions ... from a native and not from a European point of view'.<sup>96</sup> Thomson undertook an unusually immersed form of fieldwork through his relinquishment of a fixed and sedentary research base, such as that used by his contemporary Lloyd Warner who conducted research in Arnhem Land at the Milingimbi Methodist Mission from 1927 to 1929. The mobility that is so fundamental to the idea of an expedition found a good fit with the culture of nomads. It allowed Thomson to spend time with people who were 'self-supporting' and 'truly independent' from European settlement<sup>97</sup> – one of anthropology's most cherished aims. It also enabled him to place more emphasis on the 'participatory' part of anthropology's defining methodology. Stocking suggests that a simpler rephrasing of the fieldworker's key activities of 'participation, observation, interrogation' might be 'doing, seeing, talking', and argues that even Malinowski ('like most fieldworkers since?'), who is credited with setting the discipline's methodological standard, spent more time in the Trobriands gathering information through seeing and talking than through doing.<sup>98</sup> In contrast, once embarked on an expeditionary journey, Thomson undertook much of the daily hands-on activity of a nomadic lifestyle – sleeping on the ground, sharing a fire and camp, hunting and killing game, attending ceremonial events and travelling vast areas of country. 'I found that once I was on a journey', he wrote, 'I was obliged to live the same life as they lived'.<sup>99</sup>

Thomson's expedition reports reveal a curious enmeshment between himself and the people he had been commissioned to study, 'pacify' and 'control': they are simultaneously members of his expedition, his indispensable assistants, guides, interpreters, mediators and labourers; the purported recipients of his peacekeeping aims; and subjects of anthropological survey and research. Through these entangled methods and encounters in the field, he fell 'under the spell of my

black brothers', to use his phrase (always with the proviso that they abided by a culture not yet 'broken down' by colonizing forces). 'I felt that I had more in common with these splendid and virile natives than with my own people', he wrote.<sup>100</sup>

He became wedded to this notion of immersed, mobile and participatory anthropological research through the form of the expedition, and hoped to repeat it on his 1957 trip to the Lake Mackay region in Central Australia, for which he received the RGS's 'official blessing'.<sup>101</sup> He turned to the society again for further support to mount a return expedition to the region, emphasizing that the country 'is still only partly explored' and inhabited by a remnant group of desert-dwelling people adapted to a harsh desert ecology whom he planned to study before it was 'too late'. Again, he expressed anxiety about competing American expeditions he believed would follow in the wake of his own, especially once his photographs had been distributed by the press.<sup>102</sup> In 1962, during a period when the RGS was inundated with requests for support from proposed university and youth expeditions, Thomson was granted £250 (the most generous sum allocated to any of the applicants).<sup>103</sup> For his return expedition, he hoped to find a surveyor, geologist and botanist to accompany him. 'I was trained in botany and zoology as well as in anthropology, but I cannot do all the scientific work single-handed as I tried to do this year', he wrote at the age of fifty-six.<sup>104</sup> Together they would study desert ecology and desert people in tandem. In his near-to-final expedition he had turned full circle back to a scientific team approach, reminiscent of Wilkins or Haddon, and drawing on diverse forms of expertise as a way to continue his commitment to a form of interdisciplinary enquiry that considered people and particular environments as interlinked, rather than separate realms of concern.

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