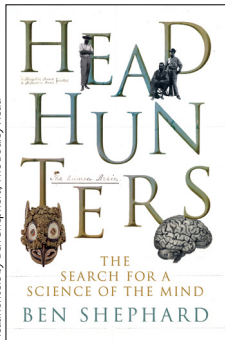


## Book

### When scientists wanted to know everything



Headhunters by Ben Shephard, The Bodley Head

**Headhunters: the Search for a Science of the Mind**

Ben Shephard. The Bodley Head/  
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Let's do some free association as we psychiatrists used to call it. I name a branch of science, and you immediately name one or two pioneers—key figures that helped to establish the discipline. So if I say “public health”, you say “John Snow—the chap who took the handle of the pump”, or if I mention “microbiology” you say “Louis Pasteur”. OK, let's start with an easy one. “Psychiatry”. I'm betting that most people would immediately say “Sigmund Freud”, except for Smart Alecs or clinical psychiatrists (not quite the same thing) who rather self-consciously might suggest “Emil Kraepelin”. Let's try another. “Anthropology”. Not such a clear answer this time—but I would expect to hear shouts of “Bronislaw Malinowski”, “James Frazer”, and at a distance “imbécile, c'est Claude Lévi-Straus, qui d'autre?”. Last go—“Psychology”. Smart money is on “Wilhelm Wundt”, but the clapper is declaring a tie between Ivan Pavlov or John B Watson.

But what I am confident about is that no one would mention any of the four characters who are the subject of Ben Shephard's intriguing new book *Headhunters: the Search for a Science of the Mind*. Step forward William Rivers, Grafton Elliot Smith, Charles Myers, and William McDougall, each of whom has a good claim to be if not the founders, at least some of the early giants of psychiatry, anthropology, and psychology. When Tom Stoppard learned that Vladimir Lenin, James Joyce, and Tristan Tzara were all in Zurich in 1917 he had the plot of his play *Travesties*. All of Shephard's main characters were similarly in Cambridge in the 1890s, and, unlike Stoppard, Shephard does not need to engineer fictional encounters, because the real encounters that his foursome had were stranger than fiction.

Shephard's narrative begins in 1898, as an expedition sets off to the Torres

Islands, located between New Guinea and Australia. Funded by Cambridge University, the British Association, the Royal Society, and the Royal Geographical Society, the expedition contained an impressive range of talent—a medical doctor, psychologist, anthropologist, evolutionary biologist, and neurophysiologist. Actually, that was just one person—William Rivers. Likewise, there was also a medical doctor, psychologist, anthropologist, Alpinist, and musicologist—again, one person, Charles Myers. Also present on the expedition was William McDougall, merely a medical doctor turned psychologist, but he still

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had a range of intellectual interests and achievements unlikely to be present in any modern practitioner. McDougall worked on matters as diverse as vision, intelligence, race, and philosophy, and would write popular textbooks on abnormal, physiological, and social psychology.

Shephard's method is to interweave the narratives of the changing relationships, life circumstances, loves, and scientific work of the three members of the Torres Island expedition, with those of the fourth member of the quartet, the Australian anatomist, evolutionary biologist turned Egyptologist, Grafton Elliot Smith. The result is more of a story of scientists than a history of science, but Shephard does well to keep on top of topics as varied as Melanesian fertility rites, the development of the human forebrain, how nerves regenerate, the physiology of colour vision, the psychology of hearing, dreams and their repression, psychic research, social Darwinism,

treatment of neurosis, marsupial reproduction, intelligence testing, the origins of music, and much more. But the closest to a coherent thread running through the extraordinary range and depth of their collective scholarship, would be the study of what they called “human nature” using a bewildering variety of methods and sources.

And as we follow the ups and subsequent downs of the careers of Shephard's quartet, we also encounter an amazing supporting cast. Anyone who has trained in any London teaching hospital will recognise the doctors who have cameo roles in the narrative, such as John Hughlings Jackson or David Ferrier, since nearly all are commemorated by having wards named after them. But the quartet were connected to the world of culture beyond the hospital—from Arnold Bennett to Ludwig Wittgenstein and Solly Zuckerman, the index is an A to Z of the intellectual life of the period.

It was a period of unparalleled intellectual and scientific creativity; it was also littered with racism, sexism, and snobbery. Myers was Jewish, and there is little doubt that his career was undermined by casual anti-Semitism, not least during his war service. Race thinking was also common currency—indeed, when McDougall moved to Harvard after the First World War, his initial lectures, in which he asserted that “coloured peoples”, or “the Negro race” were of lower intelligence than the “white population” dealt his career a blow from which it never fully recovered. This was not so much because of his views (which would have been shared by most of his audience), but the public way in which he had expressed them.

When McDougall, Myers, and Rivers founded the British Psychological Society, early meetings took place at King's College London. The founders were keen to attract people from

diverse backgrounds (if only that tradition continued at major psychiatry or psychology meetings today), but not gender. One female academic wrote that although women were not actively excluded, it still “seemed wiser not to attend”. This was probably good advice, since McDougall had written that “really superior women...would abandon all thoughts of a career and find their highest duty and pleasure in producing, rearing and educating the largest number of children that their health and their means will allow”.

And then there was snobbery. Grafton Smith was Australian—he had added the middle name of Elliot to distance himself from his colonial heritage, but it was to little avail—one of his early disciples would write that Grafton Smith’s later intellectual decline and isolation owed much to the fact that he was “at bottom, like many Australians, lacking in those things, loyalty, sincerity, altruism and hundreds of other things that made up a gentleman”.

But brilliant as they were, I think it is a fair assumption that if anyone did bother to play along with the free association game at the start of this review, he or she failed to associate the founding fathers of any of the disciplines with Shephard’s quartet. There were several reasons. Rivers died early, of a strangulated hernia just when he was about to stand for the Labour Party in the 1922 General Election. Grafton Smith became obsessed with the concept of cultural diffusion, believing that everything, including man itself, originated in Egypt, and then did a Trevor-Roper when he publicly authenticated the infamous “Piltdown Man” fake skull. McDougall was let down by his intellectual arrogance—no matter how great a polymath you are, it still pays to have friends, and he had a knack of alienating those he had. Myers, upset by the way in which he had been sidelined by the Army on account of his liberal views on the nature and treatment of shell shock,

withdrew from the field, and even refused to give evidence to the 1922 Royal Commission on shell shock. He moved into industrial psychology, but never repeated the impact of his earlier work.

All of the reputations of the quartet have suffered. Some of their writings can in retrospective seem strange. Rivers’ idea that the nervous system could be divided into “protopathic” and “epicritic” succumbed to what a later commentator called the “danger that always besets abstract thinking, that of confusing thoughts with things”. Their common assumption that they were civilised people studying savages, no matter how noble, makes for difficult reading. Rivers has been partly rescued by what was only a brief period in his career—the months he spent at Craiglockhart War Hospital in 1917 and his encounter with Siegfried Sassoon, and it took a modern novelist, Pat Barker, to do this in her *Regeneration* trilogy.

The resurgence of interest in the psychology of trauma that followed the introduction of the term post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) has meant that the name of Myers now appears in some contemporary accounts, but only as the person who introduced the term “shell shock”. Few will realise that shell shock in the First World War and PTSD are not one and the same, and even fewer will know that Sassoon never suffered from it anyway. But even if shell shock was banned from the military and medical lexicon as far back as 1917, as the Army turned its back on Myers, his term is now firmly enshrined in popular culture. A quick check on *Google News* as I write this review tells me that several basketball teams, two football managers, and the entire English cricket team are afflicted by the disorder, not to mention politicians everywhere.

What Rivers, McDougall, Grafton Smith, and Myers had attempted to solve, as McDougall put it “the



The 1898 Torres Island Expedition

secrets of human nature”, was out of reach, and always will be. Each man was overtaken by geniuses who aimed lower, but whose achievements have stood the test of time better. McDougall had to give way to Pavlov and Watson, the founder of behaviourism. Malinowski eclipsed everything that all of them had achieved in anthropology, and carbon dating destroyed all Grafton Smith’s theories on the relationships between ancient societies.

*Headhunters* is an entertaining elegy for an era that has vanished, and is unlikely to return—an era in which smart, ambitious scientists could cross disciplines with greater ease than they could cross oceans. For most modern scientists it is now the other way round.

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