Malinowski

Odyssey of an Anthropologist
1884–1920

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For Helena, who made it possible

Acknowledgments

Helena Wayne, Malinowski's youngest daughter and literary executor, invited me to write this biography. She gave me unrestricted access, not only to her father's papers, but also to many other biographical materials that she had accumulated over a period of two decades. They included notes of interviews she had conducted, in person or by correspondence, with a number of Malinowski's pupils, friends and colleagues. This is, therefore, an authorized biography informally commissioned by Helena with her sisters' approval. It is also fully authorized in the sense that Helena read and implicitly endorsed the final draft. Should this suggest a hagiographic compact between us, I hasten to say that nothing could be further from the truth. Inevitably, during our many conversations I was influenced by her attitude towards her father, but this does not mean that I surrendered my impartiality as an outsider. Indeed, at times Helena took a more uncompromising view of his shortcomings than I was inclined to do, and I can recall conversations in which I found myself in the curious position of defending him against her critical judgement. Nor was Helena able to peer over my shoulder as I wrote. She lived in England, I lived in Australia. Between 1998 and 2002, when most of this book was written, we communicated only by letter and telephone, and then infrequently. There are passages in this biography which, as I wrote them, I felt sure Helena would wish me to remove or modify. But not once did she take me to task for presenting her father in an unfavourable light; not once did she ask me to withdraw anything I had written. The reader may judge whether this was owing to my tact or to her magnanimity, but I have not knowingly exercised self-censorship and her forbearance has been greater than I had any right to expect.

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M. W. Y.
Pimlico, London
November 2003

A Note on Orthography and Pronunciation

Polish orthographic conventions have been followed except in a couple of cases: Kraków and Warszawa appear as Cracow and Warsaw. The approximate pronunciation of Bronisław Malinowski's name is Bronis-*waav* Malin-*of*-ski. Once he had begun to write in English, he replaced the 'ł' in Bronisław with 'l', which elicits 'Bronis-*law*' rather than 'Bronis-*laav*' in Anglophone speakers. In addition, Americans are inclined to mispronounce Malinowski as Malin-*ow*-ski. I believe this book would read quite differently if one's inner ear heard an open '*ow*' instead of a narrow '*of*' (or '*off*') in the middle of his name.

Malinowski's grandfather's name, Juljan, and his father's, Lucjan, can be rendered by the more familiar Julian and Lucian. The pronunciation of his mother's maiden name, Łącka, presents particular problems for English speakers, but '*Wonska*' comes close, especially if the '*on*' is slightly nasalized. Of the other Polish names which occur frequently in this book, Józefa sounds like '*Yusefa*', while it is the second syllable in Helena that takes the stress. Stanisław Witkiewicz is approximately 'Stanis-*waav* Vit-*kee*-eh-vich'; Staś is 'Stash'; Żenia is 'Zhenia'; Tośka is 'Toshka'.

Malinowski's Kiriwinian orthography is somewhat anomalous by modern standards, but I have not changed it except when rendering a few place names. As in Italian and Spanish, vowels in Kiriwina (Kilivila to modern linguists) are voiced with a full, open value. Stress, sometimes barely perceptible, usually falls on the penultimate syllable, though in longer words it falls on the anti-penultimate syllable. 'Omarakana', for instance, is lightly accented on the second 'a'.

Introduction

Sixty years after his death, Malinowski remains a fascinating figure. If Charles Darwin is the archetypal biologist, Bronislaw Malinowski is the archetypal anthropologist – the Polish aristocrat who invented the rigorous rite of passage called ethnographic fieldwork and revolutionized social anthropology in Britain. He has been cast as William the Conquerer to Sir James Frazer's King Harold, a king-slayer who inscribed a Domesday Book for the Trobriand Islands of Melanesia.

His times were momentous, encompassing two world wars and the birth of modernism. He was a contemporary of modernist icons such as T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, Franz Kafka, John Maynard Keynes, D. H. Lawrence, Robert Musil, Ezra Pound, Lytton Strachey and Ludwig Wittgenstein. Like many of these men, he chose exile, straddled two or more worlds, and bridged the cultural currents of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. A true, if ambivalent, cosmopolitian, he was born a citizen of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, became a Polish citizen in 1920, a British citizen in 1931, and was contemplating United States citizenship at the time of his death in 1942. Besides Poland, England and America, he lived and worked in Australia, Papua (ex-British New Guinea), Italy, Africa and Mexico.

A legendary Malinowski inhabits the folklore of the discipline, enlivening classrooms and lecture halls wherever anthropology is taught. (His provocative definition of the subject as 'the study of man embracing woman' still elicits groans from first-year university students.) Adam Kuper sees in his myth the exemplary tale of a prophet: 'The false start, then the illness and conversion, followed by migration; the earth-shattering calamity – no less than a world war – leading to isolation in the wilderness; the return with a message; the battle of the disciples.'[1] The messianic hero is the complete ethnographer who is empathetically at home with the savage,

speaking his language and living (almost) as he does. This modern ethnographer descends from the missionary's verandah and pitches his tent in the middle of the native village, where he stays and stays, enduring sickness and sexual privation, loneliness and boredom, in pursuit of 'the Ethnographer's final goal', which is 'to grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realize *his* vision of *his* world'.[2] Such heroic endurance in the winning of ethnographic riches is rewarded by an elevation in status, the acclaim of colleagues and the sweet envy of rivals.

Caricatures of this popular image of Malinowski and his works have appeared in George Perec's novel *Life: A User's Manual*, in Umberto Eco's short story 'Industry and Sexual Repression in a Po Valley Society' and in the American television series *Young Indiana Jones*. In an 'encyclopedic tour of the fabled South Seas', Tony Wheeler of the *Lonely Planet Guide* presents a lay version of the legend:

> Anthropologists are often a colorful lot, but it would be hard to find a more colorful character than Bronislaw Malinowski. Born in Kraków, Poland, Malinowski had the good fortune to be in the right place – Australia – at the wrong time – the start of World War I. He avoided internment as an enemy national in exchange for a spot of self-exile in the remote Trobriand Islands, east of Papua New Guinea. There Malinowski set to work studying the islanders, their intricate trading rituals, their yam cults, and – the subject that always seems to intrigue anthropologists most – their sexual habits.[3]

A kernel of mundane truth lies in this romantic shell. Although Malinowski was neither the first ethnographer in the Trobriands nor the first Western anthropologist to spend a year or more among a 'primitive' people documenting their customs and learning their language, it is true that his myth has long served social anthropology as a validating charter for its methods of fieldwork. He was one of those paradigmatic figures who, through a serendipitous combination of talent, training and timing, personify historical trends. He rode the wave of a disciplinary advance to professionalism that had begun at the end of the nineteenth century and gathered momentum by the time he proclaimed his functionalist revolution in the early 1920s. He embodied a scientific ideal: that of a more exact knowledge of 'primitive' societies in particular and human culture in general. Of course, Malinowski could also be understood in household terms as a great man, an exemplary self-mythologizing hero whose legend was embroidered by

many of his pupils. Speaking on their behalf, Hortense Powdermaker conceded simply: 'We were all, probably, more successful because of the myth than we would have been without it.'[4]

The posthumous publication of his New Guinea fieldwork diaries in 1967 brought Malinowski fresh notoriety. A raw and nakedly honest account of his tribulations, with its Conradian subtexts, its Oedipal anguish and Dostoevskian moods, *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term* provoked charges of misanthropy and racism. It sensationally debunked his own myth of empathetic rapport with his Melanesian subjects and revealed how temperamentally unsuited he was to the protracted, coalface fieldwork that he advocated. In a bemused review of the *Diary*, Clifford Geertz denounced this 'archetypal fieldworker' as a 'crabbed, self-preoccupied, hypochondriacal narcissist, whose fellow-feeling for the people he lived with was limited in the extreme'. Yet for Geertz (too young to have known Malinowski) there was an enormous paradox: how could such a disagreeable man have been such a great ethnographer? 'What saved him,' Geertz surmised, 'was an almost unbelievable capacity for work.'[5] The work was expiatory, the result a prodigious corpus of ethnographic data. Although it scandalized the profession in the late 1960s and helped precipitate a crisis of anthropological conscience in the 1970s, the *Diary* became an iconic text that endorsed the postmodern and post-colonial preoccupations of subsequent decades, serving as a charter for a more self-consciously reflexive and interpretative anthropology, one that rejected positivist scientific pretensions and embraced a more humanistic agenda.

Odyssey of an Anthropologist covers the first thirty-five years of Malinowski's life and seeks to explain why, and how, he became an anthropologist. It traces his intellectual and sentimental journey from his birthplace in the capital of the imperial Austrian province of Galicia to the Mediterranean and the Canary Islands, to Leipzig and London, to Warsaw and Zakopane, to Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Australia, colonial Papua and the Trobriand Islands – and finally to the moment when he sailed for England, laden with the ethnographic riches that would secure his legacy.

It is important to demystify Malinowski's achievements as a fieldworker, and my narrative reveals to what degree they were flawed or exaggerated – and, conversely, to what extent they have been underestimated. I devote eight chapters, almost a third of the book, to his Papuan fieldwork. Such detailed treatment is warranted, I believe, by its legendary status. Above all,

I want to show that so much more was happening in Malinowski's life during the various phases of his fieldwork than the dedicated accumulation of anthropological data. He accomplished his fieldwork in the teeth of a discouraging array of obstacles – social, political, psychological and medical. Tenacity of purpose saw him through in the end, but it was a close thing. It was also largely happenstance (missed boats, absent missionaries and the like) that led him to the Trobriands in the first place and kept him there long enough to make the kind of discoveries that laid the groundwork for his fame.

If Malinowski had been *only* a consummate professional ethnographer and a charismatic academic leader whose contributions remain relevant today, he would hardly justify such a bulky biography. There are, however, so many extracurricular activities worth the telling, so many more aspects to his private life and public career. I have made no attempt to separate these two conventional facets of his existence, for he lived his anthropology to an extraordinary degree, and it would not have been true to the spirit of Malinowski's life to distinguish sharply between his private and public selves. He became a vocal popularizer, pundit and public intellectual who was invited to pronounce on the most debated issues of the interwar period: sex, marriage, birth control, the family, eugenics, religion, the rise of Fascism, mobilization and war. Malinowski held firm opinions, and he wrote wittily and lectured tirelessly to propagate them. At the time of his death he was a controversial international celebrity: a cosmopolitan humanist dedicated to the fight against totalitarianism.

While this biography can be read *inter alia* as a critical evaluation of Malinowski's place in the history of anthropology, this task has already been accomplished by more able historians. I could not hope, for example, to surpass the scholarly depth and scope of George Stocking's *After Tylor*, which situates Malinowski at the centre of the broad historical tradition of British anthropology between 1888 and 1951. Expositions and critiques of Malinowski's theories and of his work more generally are legion, and the secondary literature continues to grow. While this is the first full-scale biography of Malinowski to be published, many valid biographical essays exist.[6] It would have hindered my narrative immeasurably, and added inordinately to its length, to engage with this vast literature at every turn. I have adhered quite firmly to the historicist principle that only Malinowski's coevals deserve a place in this biography. The principle necessarily excludes myself as author, and I have resisted the temptation to argue with my own

contemporaries. I reserve for an epilogue to the second volume some reflections on Malinowski's intellectual legacy and a consideration of his posthumous reputation.

If this is not, in the strictest sense, an intellectual biography, then what is it? One of my rejected subtitles was 'The Savage Pole', which quotes Malinowski's ironic self-deprecation in acknowledging that, despite his aspiration to be British, he despised the empire-building game of cricket. Other discarded subtitles were 'The Making of an Anthropologist' (too pedestrian) and 'Portrait of the Anthropologist as a Young Man' (too obviously Joycean). Whatever its shortcomings, *Odyssey of an Anthropologist* invokes the classical image of fateful, adventurous voyages; it also points the way to *Argonauts*. Malinowski's life was indeed one of restless journeying: an interminable, migratory search for knowledge of self and others, for love and fame, for elusive health and happiness. Because he fancied himself as the Conrad of anthropology – although he rightly suspected that he was closer to being its Zola – and because I have sought to describe the intricate interplay of his life and his works, this might best be characterized as a literary biography.

It is also a resource for scholars to use as they see fit. I have paid particular heed to the historical record, and in the degree that the biography is based on verifiable documentary evidence it is scientific. Mindful of the critic Desmond MacCarthy's axiom that a biographer is 'an artist who is on oath', I have invented no facts, confected no imaginary conversations, conjured no hypothetical events. Some readers may regret the dearth of speculative interpretation in my account, but in reflecting Malinowski's obsessive interest in his own psyche, this is inevitably a psychological biography. It has been said that all modern biography is written in Freud's shadow. I acknowledge this, but in attempting to explain the behaviour of a self-confessed neurotic I have called upon Freudian insights only when Malinowski himself appeared to endorse them. More generally, I have sought to present his point of view, '*his* vision of *his* world', and have tried to view my subject 'in the round and not in the flat' – as Frazer wrote of Malinowski's Trobriander – to give full recognition to the fact that he was 'a creature of emotion at least as much as of reason'.[7]

The private diaries that Malinowski kept intermittently between 1908 and 1918 presented me with thorny problems of biographical narration. They are so embarrassingly rich in confessional material, so revelatory of his introspective, multifaceted character, it seemed best in the end to recount

the events of Malinowski's life during these crucial years according to the scripts his diaries dictated. His voice, his vision of his world, had to prevail in the telling of his story; besides, this narrative device most accurately renders the full stretch and flavour of Malinowski's thinking and feeling. I judged it even more necessary to quote generously from the early diaries that are inaccessible to the Anglophone reader, though they have recently been published in their original Polish.[8]

The diaries help to illuminate Malinowski's ethnographic style and field techniques. He once noted that his diary was complementary to his ethnography, which was as close as he came to an admission (made by later generations of anthropologists) that ethnography is implicity informed by autobiography as much as it is by explicit theory and method. Reciprocally, Malinowski applied rudimentary functional analysis to the understanding of his own life, and I show that his use of what he called 'synoptic charts' was biographical before it was ethnographical and pedagogical. 'Integrate fragmenting themes,' he urged himself, and it is surely an obligation of his biographer to try to integrate his career and his character in order to indictate how the latter shaped his particular mode of anthropological thinking.

There is a complex relationship to be explored, then, between Malinowski's living, thinking and writing. Readers will differ in their opinions as to how I have tilted the balance between life and works. Some may think that I have devoted a disproportionate amount of space to Malinowski's love affairs, however revealing they were of the man. But, beginning with his adoring mother, women played a strikingly influential part in Malinowski's life, and when he was in love he could think of little else. His romantic passions consumed his time as well as his heart, and for good or ill they inflected his work. I have heeded Lytton Strachey's warning that 'discretion is not the better part of biography', and my subject, after all, was the author of *The Sexual Life of Savages* and a friend and admirer of Havelock Ellis.

Malinowski's obsession with his own moral character is evident from his diaries, which famously conclude with the despairing judgment: 'Truly I lack real character!' In any conventional sense, of course, he most certainly did not, and of his paradoxical character there is an abundance of anecdotal evidence. He appealed and appalled in about equal measure, but few could remain unresponsive to his protean personality. Another of his flippant definitions of anthropology was 'the study of rude man by rude men', and his colleagues did indeed find him rude as well as charming. On first

meeting him, Ruth Benedict wrote to Margaret Mead: 'He has the quick imagination and by-play of mind that makes him a seven-days' joy.' But Robert Lowie recalled Malinowski's 'adolescent eagerness to shock the ethnological bourgeois', and Ashley Montagu remembered how his 'ornery sense of humour and his occasional hapless aspersions did not sit well with some of his colleagues and students'.[9] Undoubtedly, Malinowski made enemies as easily as he made friends. He could be moody, irritable, hypersensitive, self-absorbed, vain, petulant, foul-mouthed, sentimental and melancholic. But he could also be gregarious, emotionally generous, deeply courteous and scintillatingly eloquent. He was a demonically hard worker whose zeal galvanized those around him.

For readers curious about my credentials for writing this biography, I offer some autobiographical details (with apologies for any hint of self-mythologizing). Half a century ago, following an undistinguished school career in Manchester, I sailed for Australia aboard an Orient Line steamer. Knowing nothing of anthropology and never having heard the name Malinowski, I had no inkling that some forty years earlier he had sailed the same route on a ship of the same line that called at the same ports: Naples, Port Said, Aden, Colombo, Fremantle, Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney. After crossing the Tasman to New Zealand, I spent two carefree years working in offices, warehouses and factories, on wharfs and sheep farms. While hitchhiking one day, I met a young anthropologist who told me intriguing stories about the Maori. The voyage back to England took me the breadth of the South Pacific, and although the ship called only at Fiji and Tahiti, I became, rather like Malinowski at the same age, enchanted by the tropics – by coral reefs and turquoise lagoons, golden beaches stretching beneath coconut palms, and frangipani-scented girls with flawless chocolate skins.

My real engagement with Malinowski began on 1 October 1960 – memorable because it was my first day as an undergraduate student at University College London. I had enrolled for the BA honours course in anthropology, and was immediately advised to immerse myself in some classical ethnography; Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* and *The Sexual Life of Savages* were mentioned. I dutifully began to read these books and the Exotic and the Erotic soon coloured the grey October mornings of Bloomsbury's Gower Street. As my first essay topic I chose to write on the chiefly political system of the Trobriands, but I confess that – although I clutched *Argonauts* to my bosom in the chilly corridors of University

College as Malinowski had hugged *The Golden Bough* on the steps of the medieval Jagiellonian – I did not feel then as he had felt about Frazer, 'bound to the service' of Malinowskian anthropology. Fate, however, decreed otherwise.

Two of my teachers at UCL, Daryll Forde (chair of the anthropology department) and Phyllis Kaberry, had known Malinowski personally. At the London School of Economics, where I also attended lecture courses, I met two other pupils of Malinowski: Raymond Firth and Lucy Mair. While Malinowski's Melanesian monographs had warmed me, I was soon required to enter the more rigorous African worlds of Radcliffe-Brown, Evans-Pritchard and Meyer Fortes. My anthropological apprenticeship thus benefited from the double intellectual inheritance of that clannish era of British anthropology – that of the two founding fathers, Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown.

In late 1965, after completing a master's thesis on African divine kingship, I sailed with my bride for Australia. I had taken up Phyllis Kaberry's suggestion of applying for a scholarship at the Australian National University (ANU) with a view to working in Papua New Guinea. I joined an anthropology department whose foundation professor had been Siegfried Nadel, another of Malinowski's pupils, in a research school whose first director had been Raymond Firth. My chief academic supervisor was Ann Chowning, a pupil of Ward Hunt Goodenough, who had been one of Malinowski's pupils at Yale; my other supervisor was Bill Stanner, who had attended Malinowski's seminar at the LSE. I thus came to do fieldwork in the Malinowskian mode on Goodenough Island in eastern Papua, one hundred miles to the south of the Trobriands.

In October 1966, accompanied by my wife and infant son, I made my first visit to the Trobriands. We stayed with the Australian doctor on the government station at Losuia and accompanied him on his medical rounds of villages on Kiriwina Island. I took notes and photographs but neglected to ask if anyone remembered Malinowski. On a much later trip to Kiriwina in June 1989, I spent a week as the guest of my PhD student Linus Digim'Rina in his natal village of Okeboma where we witnessed a spectacular yam festival. Again, I was preoccupied with present rather than past events and asked only cursory questions concerning Malinowski. Many villagers knew of his books by reputation (especially *Argonauts* and *Sexual Life of Savages*) though it seemed that very few had tried to read them. A few years later, however, Linus was able to record legends about Malinowski in