Henry Devenish Skinner: 1886–1978

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The death of H. D. Skinner in Dunedin, New Zealand, on 9 February 1978, at the age of 91, symbolized the end of the pioneering period in the history of both anthropology and museum curatorship in the South Pacific. As Skinner's long and distinguished career has been the subject of a number of papers (Blake-Palmer 1958; Freeman 1959a; Gathercole in Skinner 1974:11-17; Gathercole 1978), I have omitted most of the details here, and have concentrated attention on aspects of his work which seem most appropriate to the readership of Asian Perspectives. (For a bibliography of Skinner's writings, see Freeman 1959b, partly supplemented by later papers cited in Skinner 1974:197.)

Skinner was born in New Plymouth, Taranaki on 18 December 1886. On both sides of his family he was descended from early settlers from the English West Country, and Skinner retained close links with England all his life. His father was a surveyor who became a notable authority on local history and Maori culture, being one of the founders of the Polynesian Society in 1892. Young Harry inherited both these interests, developing them in the northern parts of the South Island when he went to school at Nelson College in 1902.

Skinner enrolled at Victoria University College, Wellington in 1906 to study law, but in 1910 he transferred to the University of Otago, Dunedin to complete an arts degree by taking units in classics and zoology. Wishing to study anthropology, this was the nearest mix he could devise from syllabuses available in New Zealand universities at the time. A natural habitué of museums with a strong interest in collecting, he was lucky enough

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when he graduated in 1912 to be given temporary charge of the Otago Museum for six
months while the curator, Dr. W. B. Benham, who was also professor of zoology, was on
leave. When Benham returned, Skinner became a schoolteacher. The possibilities of ob-
taining formal training in anthropology appeared remote.

The outbreak of World War I changed all this. Skinner joined the Otago Infantry Bat-
talion and in March 1915 was drafted to Egypt to join the Australian and New Zealand
Army Corps. There he began to visit archaeological sites near Cairo. As a lance-corporal,
he took part in the Gallipoli campaign, where he was seriously wounded, awarded the
Distinguished Conduct Medal, and mentioned in dispatches, both for bravery in the field.
Later in the same year, he was discharged in England as unfit for further military service.
He married Eva Gibbs, of Dunedin, and in 1916 enrolled at Cambridge University to
study for a postgraduate Diploma in Ethnology. Later he took a B.A. by research—this
was shortly before the institution of the Ph.D. degree.

Skinner’s teachers included A. C. Haddon, reader in ethnology, and Anatole von
Hügel, curator of the Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, both of whom had been in
Southeast Asia and the Pacific. Haddon fostered Skinner’s enthusiasm for ethnology, par-
ticularly for taxonomic studies, and von Hügel encouraged him to look for a museum ca-
reer in New Zealand. He wrote a thesis on the material culture of the Moriori of the
Chatham Islands, then a subject of considerable scholarly interest. The dominant view
was one strongly espoused by S. Percy Smith and Elsdon Best, the two foremost scholars
of Maori culture at the time, that the Moriori were descendants of the Maruiwi, “... an
‘inferior’ Melanesian people who had been conquered by the ‘superior’ Hawaiki Polyne-
sians, and that those of them not slain or assimilated by the Hawaiki immigrants had fled
to the Chatham Islands ...” (Freeman 1959a:15). Skinner argued, mainly on the evi-
dence of material culture, that the Moriori were Polynesians and that they stood closest in
cultural affinity to the early inhabitants of Murihiku in southern New Zealand. His work
“... was the first systematic account of the material culture of a Polynesian people, and
set new standards in description, classification and analysis. It demonstrated how, by us-
ing the comparative method, ethnological research could lead to important historical con-
clusions ...” (Freeman 1959a:16). Much of Skinner’s later work was of a similar stamp.
More than any other scholar of his day, he helped to define the ethnological characteris-
tics of Polynesia.

Skinner returned to New Zealand in November 1918, soon to be appointed ethnologist
at the Otago Museum and lecturer in ethnology at the University of Otago. The latter was
the first appointment of its kind in either New Zealand or Australia. Shortly afterwards,
he also became Hocken Librarian for some years, which gave him a good knowledge of
historical sources and, because he had charge of a small but growing collection of paint-
ings and drawings, of New Zealand fine art. He stayed at Otago for the rest of his life,
becoming director of the museum in 1938. He was eventually appointed reader in anthro-
pology in the University, having taught a comprehensive one-year course since 1920.
After his retirement from the museum, he was created director emeritus in 1957.

Skinner’s greatest achievement was to transform the anthropological and archaeological
collections at the Otago Museum. When he went there in 1919, they were mediocre. He
fashioned them into some of the most wide-ranging, balanced, and high-quality collec-
tions to grace a museum serving a university city of the size of Dunedin that one could
find anywhere in the English-speaking world. Aside from their public importance, they
provided excellent teaching material for students at all levels. Curators were then much
Dr. H. D. Skinner, on his 90th birthday, looking at a replica of a whale-bone *patu* found in Huahine, donated by Yoshihiko H. Sinoto. (Photograph by G. S. Park)
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less inhibited than are their successors to exchange objects and, because prices were low, to buy regularly on the market. For thirty years, Skinner had a worldwide correspondence with curators, academics, dealers, collectors, and others wishing to dispose of objects to museums. Despite the generous assistance Skinner received from the museum's great benefactor, Willi Fels (see Skinner 1946), money was always short. Skinner persistently exchanged, bargained, bought, borrowed, and occasionally begged. The result was a collection of quite remarkable scope from the Pacific and far beyond. Such a phenomenon could not be assembled today; the state of the market and the attitude among curators that objects should not be swapped like stamps would not allow it.

Skinner's academic interests were equally broad and international. It was not, of course, an internationalism without context. He was, first and foremost, a New Zealander with, I would say, a liberal philosophical stamp akin to that held in later life by Peter Fraser, the Labour Party's Prime Minister between 1940 and 1949, for whom Skinner had a great regard. Very empirical, he was not easily drawn to theoretical generalizations. Although he was strongly in favor of the return of Maori objects to New Zealand, he could be cautious about the general principle involved. His academic approach reflected his background, education, and experience in the Pacific, the eastern Mediterranean, Britain, and elsewhere—in the inter-War years he had two sabbatical leaves, when he travelled to Hawaii, the U.S.A., and Britain, and he also worked for a time with Kenneth Emory in Tahiti. Just as Skinner had banished the Maruiwi myth from the Chatham Islands by, predominantly, a study of material culture, so he tackled the question of Polynesian origins empirically, by the comparative examination of artifacts. Characteristically, he looked from New Zealand and the tropical South Pacific outwards. For example, in the paper entitled "New Zealand Prehistory in Its Pacific Setting," which he gave to the second conference of the New Zealand Archaeological Association in May 1957, he saw the immediate source of Polynesian culture as lying no further west than the Philippines. As Golson summarized his paper: "The Luzon Neolithic has many similarities with the stone age of the South Pacific. For the Luzon Neolithic archaeology suggests two sources, south China and the north Asiatic Pacific coast with its islands. The ultimate derivation of many of the relevant culture traits in these areas is the Arctic Culture of European ethnologists" (Golson 1957:288). This was really the quintessence of Skinner's argument on this question, being much the same as that he had presented at the 4th Congress of Far Eastern Prehistorians at Manila in 1953 (Skinner 1968), parts of which are echoed in the papers on patu and ulu in his last work, Comparatively Speaking (1974). (Skinner, it should be noted, was a strong supporter of the Far Eastern Prehistory Association. He gave a paper to its Third Congress at Singapore in 1938 [Skinner 1938, 1974:101-114]. As well as attending the Fourth Congress at Manila, he was an official New Zealand delegate to the concurrent Eighth Pacific Science Congress.)

Much of this diffusionist argument no longer holds or is increasingly irrelevant. The development of systematic, stratigraphic excavation in Southeast Asia and Oceania (which Skinner welcomed with enthusiasm) has provided evidence that is generally more complete and certainly more reliable than that employed by comparative ethnology. Distributional studies of the sort Skinner used in his study of ultimate Polynesian origins relied largely on museum collections of uneven quality, often fortuitously acquired from uncontrolled sources. At best, this material could offer useful hypotheses for future testing. Skinner maintained that he saw his work in just this way (Gathercole in Skinner 1974:16-17), although sometimes he would state his interpretations of taxonomic enquiries
with more finality than his evidence justified. At the same time, I agree very much with
Mead that Skinner’s diffusionist studies possessed a breadth of scope and courage which
require them to be taken seriously. As Mead said: “... there is a real problem to solve”
(Mead 1976:428-429). I can well imagine how Skinner would have praised Bellwood’s re­
cent important book on the prehistory of southeast Asia and Oceania. He would also have
swooped on Bellwood’s comment on the distributional studies of fishing equipment done
by Anell and himself: “Now all this brings up a rather important consideration, for not all
scholars, even today, agree on the totality of a Lapita origin for Polynesian culture. My
own inclination is to give heavy stress to the Lapita Culture . . . Duff has attempted to
derive the tanged eastern Polynesian forms directly from the Philippines, through Micro­
nesia . . . Duff’s argument has been refuted by Green . . . Nevertheless, we may still need
to reckon with perhaps a little diffusion into eastern Polynesia from an area such as Japan,
perhaps through Micronesia, and evidently independent of the Lapita Culture and
Western Polynesia” (Bellwood 1978:321). There would have been a gleam in Skinner’s
eye as he marshalled the discussion; Anell, Leroi-Gourhan, Okladnikov . . . in a moment
we would have been skirting the mouth of the Amur River or treading the shores of Lake
Baikal.

Yet there was always the philosophical paradox: Skinner’s insistence that prehistoric
Polynesians should not be diluted by infusions from other groups helped to give a feeling
of historical integrity to Polynesia (and so probably made its contribution in the long run
to ideas of Maori nationalism), but his emphasis on the diffusion of traits removed from
Polynesians their right of independent invention. Disgusted by the oversubjectivism of
Smith and Best, and claiming that taxonomic studies were more objective, Skinner helped
to deny to his ancestral Polynesians those innovative powers which self-evidently contrib­
uted to their becoming Polynesians. This paradox of course reflected more profound con­
tradictions within ethnological thought as it was feeling its way to becoming an academic
subject.

Such are the tides of change. Skinner welcomed the increased professionalism of an­
thropology and archaeology in the Pacific, building on the tradition of inquiry that he
helped to create and make part of New Zealand intellectual life. He had organizational
zeal, a breadth of view, and an interest in young scholars, who, he hoped, would develop
and hand on to their own students all they thought significant from his own education,
teaching, and experience. However battered he was at times by the problems of museum
administration and finance, or temporarily downcast by the parochial or condescending
views of some of his older colleagues in the university towards his subject, Skinner re­
tained that largeness of spirit which marks the true inquirer. The man who, as a child,
had lived in a society which witnessed the collapse of the old Maori ways after the
Taranaki wars, and, as a young man, had turned from the horrors of the Dardanelles cam­
paign to the high-minded evolutionism of Cambridge ethnology, brought a distillation of
these experiences to the serious academic study of the peoples of the Pacific. Sensitive of
the past and mindful of the present, he consciously built for the future.
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