

# Australian Aboriginal anthropology at the crossroads: Finding a successor to A. P. Elkin, 1955

Geoffrey Gray<sup>1</sup> and Doug Munro<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>AIATSIS and University of Queensland; <sup>2</sup>Victoria University of Wellington

A. P. Elkin, who had dominated Australian anthropology since his appointment to the Chair of Anthropology at the University of Sydney in 1934, was concerned that coinciding with his retirement in 1955 was the possibility of the demise of Aboriginal anthropology as the core of the Sydney department. He thus attempted to influence the University authorities in their selection of his chosen successor, Ronald Murray Berndt. Such a selection would ensure the continuance of the department as the pre-eminent authority on all matters to do with Aboriginal ethnography and affairs, and maintain its critical role in the formulation of policy with mission bodies and government. The other long-serving member of the department, H. Ian Hogbin, was equally determined to see this did not happen. Hogbin wanted an appointment of a scholar who was in no way connected to Elkin. This would address the problem, inadvertently, of changing the focus of the department and would open the possibility of a shift in theoretical orientation and renewal. This article examines the machinations of the protagonists, the selection process, the quality of the candidates and the role of the mostly British-based referees, especially the LSE-based anthropologists Raymond Firth and Isaac Schapera, in shaping and influencing the decision to appoint the Africanist J. A. Barnes.

## INTRODUCTION

I have wondered about the propriety of using personal correspondence ... since it seemed like a breach of confidence. Some of this is distasteful enough to lead some readers to want to leave it out. But I have used nothing ... that does not appear in a public archive ... [I]t would be a mistake to bowdlerize their contents by selecting some extracts and deliberately avoiding others ... What I have done is to try and place such remarks in a wider context of understanding, the *verstehen* of the anthropologist ... I have not been concerned with aspects of their personal life except in so far as I considered that it affected the 'history of social anthropology'. By this I mean not only the intellectual history but their relations with organisations and colleagues, as these influenced the course of events. (Goody 1995: 6)

In 1955, Anthropology at the University of Sydney was at a crossroad. A. P. Elkin, who had dominated Australian anthropology since his appointment to the Chair in 1934, was concerned that his retirement might result in the demise of Aboriginal anthropology as the core of the Sydney department. He was aware the appointment

meant a choice between a continuation of Aboriginal anthropology or abandoning it in favour of a change of emphasis and direction. In other words, would a relevance and usefulness for State and Commonwealth political authorities be maintained or would Anthropology at Sydney join a conversation about international theoretical developments at the cost of neglecting a continual engagement with government and mission in Aboriginal affairs? We expected these matters would weigh heavily on the deliberations of the selection committee and would direct its choice of a new professor. We expected discussion on theory, on the future directions of anthropology, on the achievements and on the shortcomings of the Elkin era and such like. This was not the case. Notwithstanding, at an institutional and disciplinary level, the choice of a new professor, especially when replacing a long-serving predecessor, implicitly makes a judgment about the past of a department and opens contested visions for its future.

In our reading of appointments of professors of anthropology in Australia and New Zealand, selection committees were interested in a wider perspective than merely an assessment of the theoretical abilities and knowledge of the candidates.<sup>1</sup> Personal attributes such as a readiness to get on with colleagues, temperament, leadership qualities and teaching abilities—or, as the Sydney committee pithily put it, ‘intellect, character and personality’—were sought from colleagues and peers close to the candidates. What we found often disconcerted us. The assessor’s reports were often disturbingly personal in nature and lay bare the likes and dislikes, allegiances and enmities as well as unexpected contests and tensions within both the Sydney department and international (largely British-based) anthropology that were used to assist in appointments and hence determine the future of their peers and colleagues. This article examines and illustrates the inter-relationship of individuals, identities and institutions and how they helped to shape the development of social anthropology at Sydney and subsequently, Australian social anthropology at the end of the 1950s.

Australian universities had not, in the mid-1950s, thrown off the influence of British academics in both appointments and orientation and continued to make appointments from within the British academy. On completing their undergraduate degrees, Australian anthropologists, with few exceptions, continued to be trained in British universities—although a countervailing thrust was the ability of the Australian National University (ANU) to attract postgraduate students from overseas. Even though the situation was undergoing a slow change and Australia was starting to look to America, especially in terms of popular culture and defence, much of Australia remained rooted in Britain (Schreuder & Ward 2008). The Americanisation of Australian anthropology was at least a decade away (Beckett 2001). The key academic positions in anthropology in the British Commonwealth as well as British (United Kingdom) universities were dominated by those trained in anthropology under Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown before the war—‘the pioneer generation’ who ‘controlled the profession for two decades’. They had the decisive voice in the appointment of staff and students and the distribution of patronage (Kuper 1996:

118–19): ‘they sat on the key committees, held the influential posts, charmed the right people and consolidated a secure place for social anthropology within Britain’s elite universities’. This suggests, Mills continues, that ‘they worked harmoniously together. This was hardly the case—conflicts, disagreements and growing rivalries all shaped subsequent events’ (Mills 2008: 4). A consequence was a struggle for dominance, especially between the London School of Economics (LSE) under Firth and Oxford under Evans-Pritchard (Goody 1995: 68–85; Mills 2007, 2008: 49–69). Firth, however, had the decisive voice over senior appointments in Australia, New Zealand and Canada. South Africa was more aligned with Radcliffe-Brown’s structural functionalism—a lingering effect of Radcliffe-Brown having been professor at the University of Cape Town (1920–25). Academic appointments were also subject to government interference (see Hammond-Tooke 1997), resulting in an exodus of South African anthropologists who became influential in the British academy, including Meyer Fortes, Hilda Kuper, Monica Wilson, Max Gluckman and Isaac Schapera.

British social anthropology, between the wars and in the immediate post-war period, was dominated by Malinowskian functionalism. Historians of social anthropology show how ‘Malinowski’s ideas and scholarly influence were gradually superseded [sic] by Radcliffe-Brown’s more formalist “hyphenated functionalism” (Stocking 1995: 361) based on his re-readings of Durkheim and Mauss’ (Mills 2008: 3). These changes and the implications for the development of post-war theory in British anthropology have been traversed in Mills (2008), Kuklick (2008), Kuper (1996), Goody (1995), Stocking (1995), Riviere (2007) and Evens and Handelman (2006), for example.

Elkin’s influence during his professorship (1934–55) ‘pervaded every corner of Aboriginal matters’. He controlled all aspects of research—the research project, the research site, funding—cut down opposition and was ruthless when supporting his favoured students (Wise 1985: 191–220). Elkin practised an anthropology peculiar to Australia, focussing on what might be described as practical or applied anthropology and the use of anthropological knowledge to assist colonial authorities in the formulation of Aboriginal policy and its implementation. The other dominant practice of the Sydney anthropology department, since its foundation in 1926, had been the recording and describing of traditional Aboriginal life, ‘before it was too late’ (Gray 2007: 13–21). Australia’s colonies, Papua and the League of Nations ‘C’ Mandate of New Guinea, and Melanesia in general, were not ignored but were not central to the ethnographic interests of the department post Radcliffe-Brown. The appointment of the Viennese-born and British-trained anthropologist S. F. Nadel to the first Chair of Anthropology at ANU in 1949 certainly addressed this lack of theory in Australian anthropology—he was described by Firth as the outstanding theoretical anthropologist of his generation<sup>2</sup>—but he had limited impact on Aboriginalist Anthropology (Worsley 2008: 79–97). Nadel’s department focussed on the Pacific in its widest sense, including Southeast Asia and parts of South Asia, and largely ignored Australian Aboriginal anthropology (W. E. H. Stanner’s interest

was an exception, as was Worsley's PhD).<sup>3</sup> That the two departments had different functions also helped to cool potential rivalries: whereas the ANU department catered for staff research and PhD supervision, Sydney's taught second- and third-year undergraduates and supervised theses to the MA level. (The Arts Faculty at Sydney introduced the PhD in 1955).

The convention at Sydney was that outgoing professors remained at arm's length in the choice of their successor. But it was not in Elkin's nature to remain uninvolved and he attempted to lay the groundwork for a successor of his own choosing in the form of Ronald Berndt, which would ensure the continuance of Aboriginal anthropology as the department's focus. From the time he first applied for entry to the University of Sydney to enrol in the Diploma in Anthropology, Berndt had had the support of Elkin. He was ineligible for admittance to the course, but Elkin arranged for a change of the regulations to ensure his entry. Exactly why Elkin decided on Berndt is difficult to ascertain, but Berndt's burning ambition and determination, his enthusiasm for anthropology and his work ethic of doggedly staying at a task, which was similar to Elkin's own, were most likely key factors. (In addition, both had parents who were of German descent). When Ronald met fellow student Catherine Webb in late 1940 in Elkin's rooms (they married in April 1941), Elkin found his long-desired husband and wife combination; he was to refer to them as his 'anthropological children'.<sup>4</sup> Elkin's biographer writes that 'Elkin was their paterfamilias'. For the next decade and a half, Elkin encouraged and supported them. While they were in England completing their doctorates, Elkin arranged for a lectureship for Ronald at Sydney, ensuring that he would apply for the chair from a strong position (Wise 1985: 219). Ronald replied diffidently that when the time came, he would apply for the chair 'as you have suggested', hoping that by the time Elkin retired he would be 'strong' academically (both in degrees and theoretically—and with practical experience in organisational matters). Moreover, he declared, 'Sydney is the natural centre of my interests and my research—for both Aboriginal Australia and the Pacific'.<sup>5</sup> Elkin had invested a lot into his two favoured students.

There had been other candidates for Elkin's patronage and support, namely Phyllis Kaberry and W. E. H. Stanner, although Elkin remained ambivalent about Stanner, who was 'apt to dissipate his energy in various directions, and [found] it hard to decide just what he wants to do'.<sup>6</sup> Stanner was detached, possessed of a gift for simplicity in describing problems of a complex nature and could in his analysis be both 'critical and negative'. These qualities were recognised by Elkin who was taken by his manner and way of dealing with government, his training in economics and his skills as a colonial administrator (for example, he recommended Stanner for the position of director of the newly formed Northern Territory Native Affairs Branch). Such wide-ranging abilities coupled with his uncertainty about a professional direction—economist, colonial administration or anthropologist—saw him as the war came to an end seeking a career across disparate fields and regions (Gray 2006). Kaberry in turn had twice been offered a lectureship by Elkin, but she had

established herself with the British Colonial Office during the war, and had turned her research focus on the Cameroons.

A potential impediment to Elkin's designs was H. Ian Hogbin, a Melanesianist who had been in the department almost as long as Elkin. A deep animosity had developed between the two. Elkin was the antithesis of the more refined and elegant Hogbin (Wise 1985: 138, 220). Elkin prevented Hogbin from applying for the chair in 1955, or so the rumour goes, by threatening to expose aspects of his private life. If Elkin actually made this threat, then he was wasting his time because Hogbin did not want the chair—or more precisely, he had no wish to be lumbered with the administrative tasks inseparable from a professorship. Indeed, Hogbin's limitations as an administrator and organiser disqualified him, in Firth's view, for the Foundation Chair of Anthropology at the ANU in 1949.<sup>7</sup> In practical terms, Hogbin's unavailability for the chair snuffed out the threat that a Melanesianist might subvert Elkin's desire to maintain Aboriginal anthropology as the department's focus.

The vacant Chair was duly advertised, setting out information for candidates, including the conditions of employment and a 1 May 1955 closing date for applications. Significantly, the job description did not specify that applicants be versed in one or other field of study. Undeterred, Elkin attempted to regain the initiative by submitting a referee's report on behalf of Berndt well in advance of the closing date. In a tactical move, he attached six pages entitled, 'Functions of the Department of Anthropology', a historical overview setting out the functions of the Chair; he also listed what he called 'departmental policy'. Playing to Berndt's strengths, he put the case that 'a person whose knowledge and experience has not been in Australia and the South Pacific, will be under too great a handicap to lead the Department in its functions of field research and the study of culture change problems, and of providing the information and counsel which is sought from the Department'. The new occupant of the chair, said Elkin, should be:

especially interested in, and also well experienced in, the anthropology of the Australian Aborigines and the peoples of New Guinea and Melanesia ... [P]riority should be given to the former. Government Departments, Missionary organizations and the public rightly expect this ... [H]e should be interested in the sociological problems of the mixed-blood Aborigines, and this will lead him at least to encourage sociological research.<sup>8</sup>

Arthur Capell also highlighted this aspect in his own reference for Berndt, noting that as Berndt 'is himself a product of this University, I feel that there would be great gain in appointing one who has been for so long in such close association with the Anthropology Department, and has its interests very much at heart'. Elkin also stated that the successful applicant would take over the editorship and management of the journal *Oceania*, as he himself had done as part of his professorial duties. Berndt's application followed Elkin's schema: 'What I have sketched is based essentially on what has been instituted and accomplished in the Department. This

firm foundation, for the construction of which Professor Elkin has been pre-eminently responsible, provides an excellent basis for future development and extension'.<sup>9</sup>

While Elkin was attempting to perpetuate his legacy by entrenching Aboriginal Anthropology through the appointment of Berndt, Hogbin was doing all in his power to thwart such designs. With nothing to lose, Hogbin campaigned without inhibition for change on his terms. If Elkin was going to 'exert strong backstairs pressure', then so would he; in a few hectic weeks, Hogbin sent and received a stream of letters to and from friends and associates, pressing his case and fuelling the rumour mill. He knew that Raymond Firth and Isaac Schapera, both at LSE, would be probable referees for several candidates, and he pestered his long-time colleague and friend Firth with no fewer than four long letters between mid-April and mid-June. Hogbin quickly learned that his first choice, Edmund Leach, was not applying. Aware that Stanner would apply, Hogbin urged the youthful Maurice Freedman of LSE to submit an application.<sup>10</sup> Happily, another strong candidate, John Barnes, also applied: 'how much better either [Freedman or Barnes] would be than Berndt!'—or Stanner or Cyril Belshaw who, if appointed, would 'not only [be] a tragedy for Sydney but for the future of anthropology in Australia'.<sup>11</sup> Next, Hogbin was telling Firth that a field of eight was going to be considered the following week by the selection committee and that he would be lobbying committee members to move that Schapera and Firth rank the candidates who made the shortlist. 'My own view is that Barnes and Freedman have incomparably the best qualifications (and I would be delighted to have either of them). I hope that you share this opinion'.<sup>12</sup>

By now, Firth was becoming uneasy at the tack Hogbin was taking:

[I]t does strike me that it is a bit unwise of you to express your own attitudes so openly ... In fact it might make it a bit awkward no matter who was elected. If I am being asked to rank the candidates, in one sense the less I know about the Sydney end the better.<sup>13</sup>

But Hogbin was not about to be diverted. It now occurred to him that having the outstanding candidates Freedman and Barnes in the pool might result in the vote being split and both men dropping out in the final count, with the result that 'someone else, possibly Berndt' would be appointed: consequently, he was 'urging my friends on the Committee to support the appointment of either Barnes or Freedman—but to decide for *themselves* which'. He was confident that the committee would probably 'plump for' Barnes. He hoped that Firth did not think he was trying to influence him, 'but there will be no harm in saying that I am devoutly hoping that you will, when you are asked, place John or Maurice far far ahead of Berndt and Stanner'.<sup>14</sup>

Hogbin was presuming on a friendship in writing to Firth as he did. As we will see, Firth was his own man and did not comply with Hogbin's advice or pleadings. Firth was experienced in the role of 'kingmaker' and had, in our reading of his

earlier reports, presented the rankings fairly on the basis of what was required or, more precisely, what he perceived as the requirements of the particular institution.

## THE FIRST MEETING

The selection committee convened on 15 June and comprised the Vice-Chancellor and ten professors, the majority from the Faculty of Arts.<sup>15</sup> There were eight applicants: J. A. Barnes (age 36), C. S. Belshaw (33), R. M. Berndt (38), R. F. Fortune (52), M. Freedman (34), P. Hadfield (52),<sup>16</sup> W. E. H. Stanner (49) and G. R. Gayre (47).<sup>17</sup> As the outgoing professor, Elkin was invited to give his view on the applicants for the committee to consider. This was the usual procedure at Sydney. Elkin reiterated his 'opinion that the appointee should be a specialist in the field in and around Australia'. Elkin damned the opposition with faint praise, highlighted their weakness and exaggerated the qualities and abilities of Berndt. Elkin dismissed Gayre and Hadfield; Elkin thought Fortune had a history which militated against him ('brilliant but erratic') and, while supportive of Cyril Belshaw, nevertheless, hinted that he was not ready for the duties of a professor. He judged Freedman to be weaker than Barnes. Barnes, who he had met once in 1954 at a conference on race relations in Honolulu, was described as 'pleasant and self-assured, no independent views, subservient to others opinions, an Africanist, academically very good, workmanlike, efficient and thoughtful. He is well equipped in social anthropology but has no experience in Australian and Melanesian fields.' Barnes, Elkin declared, 'is in his right position [Reader] until he matures'. He was lukewarm about Stanner, noting that he 'is prone to let circumstances beat him', but effusive when discussing Berndt:

quietly cultured, a charming host and thoughtful; has moral strength, courage, venturesomeness [sic] and complete sincerity in his subject. He would be a good and interesting colleague. In administration he plans thoroughly. His academic career is a good one. Is at present working for a PhD in London. Berndt is the most outstanding field worker we have had. His publications have brought a great deal of fame to the Anthropology Department. He is a scholar of high rank and has strong contacts with Governments and other Universities. He is a good leader, has determination ... He is a good lecturer and has improved tremendously in the conduct of seminars.<sup>18</sup>

The Committee was moved to question his assessment: 'Were there additional referees for Berndt, anyone whose opinion is worthwhile?' they asked each other. After Elkin had withdrawn, the Committee eliminated Fortune, Belshaw, Hadfield and Gayre, leaving a shortlist comprising Barnes, Berndt, Freedman and Stanner.

## SHORTLISTED APPLICANTS

John Arundel Barnes had initially worked at the Rhodes Livingstone Institute of Social Studies (Rhodesia) and at Manchester University under Max Gluckman and,

in 1954, had accepted a post as Reader in Anthropology at LSE (Gray 2001a,b: 139). Only after considerable deliberation did Barnes send off [his] application.<sup>19</sup> Much later, he acknowledged that he was 'quite ill-prepared for working as an anthropologist in Australia', but there was no other chair on the horizon (Barnes 2001: 142).

Ronald Murray Berndt had completed a Diploma in Anthropology in 1943 (as did Catherine) and was awarded his BA (Research) in 1951 and his MA in 1954. Elkin realised that Berndt needed a doctorate for the sake of his career and that he had to do it overseas because the Sydney Arts Faculty at that point did not offer study at the PhD level. (It is possible that Elkin encouraged Ronald and Catherine Berndt to do fieldwork in the New Guinea highlands as preliminary research for their doctorates, thus better positioning Ronald for a shot at the chair). He and Catherine settled on the LSE where they were awarded their PhDs in July 1955 (Gray 2007: 149).

Maurice Freedman was the youngest, least qualified and most inexperienced of the four. He was the only candidate who had no doctorate or published monograph. He studied at King's College, London, and after the war enrolled for an MA in anthropology at the LSE where he conducted fieldwork on the 'overseas Chinese' in Singapore, he was appointed a lecturer at LSE in 1951. When he applied, he was undertaking research for the World Health Organization in Indonesia; he was part way through his PhD, which was awarded in 1957.

Stanner's case is more complicated. He was much older than the other shortlisted candidates and his career had been one of false starts, diversions and indecisiveness that perplexed his contemporaries and often drew their scorn. Stanner had been appointed, in 1949, to a Readership in Comparative Social Institutions at the ANU on Firth's recommendation.<sup>20</sup> Before Stanner accepted the readership, he had turned down the offer of the Foundation Chair in Anthropology at Auckland University College. Firth rightly pointed out that he would then be better placed to seek a more attractive chair sometime in the future,<sup>21</sup> but Stanner held back at the brink. He did 'not feel fully ready' and when a chair was offered he wanted to be sure there was 'no doubt about my fitness for it'.<sup>22</sup> His indecision over Auckland only served to reinforce Elkin's judgment to the committee: 'he is a little unsure of himself ... and prone to let circumstances beat him'.

## THE REFEREES

Not all the nominated referees were contacted. Those who were approached for reports were asked to rank the candidates relative to each other. The primary referee was Firth, followed by Schapera. It seems that most weight was given to their reports. Of all referees, Firth was the best known in Australia, having been acting Professor of Anthropology at Sydney in 1931 and 1932 and one of the four Academic Advisers in the establishment of the ANU in the late 40s and early 50s. His word carried weight. It was Firth's practice 'on these occasions' to 'act as a reference



... on the understanding that I do not just write a glowing testimonial but give a frank estimate of [a candidate's] capacities and qualities'.<sup>23</sup> Nadel, after Elkin, was the most senior anthropologist in Australia and the committee made specific reference to his judgment. It is, however, difficult to determine the weight given to the other referees, as there is no indication in the surviving record. In most instances, the other reports elucidated matters raised by Firth, Schapera and Nadel, supported their judgments or raised matters of a personal nature to show the suitability or otherwise of a candidate. The referees were familiar with the work of the shortlisted candidates, having supervised and/or taught them either at Sydney or in London. Elkin and Capell wrote references for Berndt and did not mention the other aspirants for the Chair. Their agenda, as we stated earlier, was to retain the continuity of the discipline and the ethnographic interests of the department and to ensure the success of Berndt.

There was widespread agreement among the referees that Berndt was an accomplished fieldworker (Gluckman, Forde, Schapera, Evans-Pritchard and Kaberry) and an equally strong countervailing consensus that he was deficient in his grasp of anthropological theory (Schapera, Mair, Kaberry and Nadel). The ready acknowledgement that Berndt was well published was turned into the vice of being over-published, his publications being described by one referee as 'If anything ... too voluminous, too full of ethnographic detail with theoretical issues still somewhat undeveloped'. Schapera went so far as to say 'that he has reached a stage where it would be to his advantage to do less writing and more reading and thinking', and Kaberry opined that 'He has yet to learn to eliminate the unessential and develop a major theme or argument'.<sup>24</sup> Nadel was scathing in stating that Berndt lacked 'sophistication':

his anthropology is still rather crude... He is not too good at expressing himself concisely, at developing thoughts in a clear and systematic way, and at convincing others in argument. I do not doubt his gifts as an ethnographer, though I should not call him exceptionally gifted. But I am convinced that, at least at the moment, he is not equal to the task of a teacher nor in other ways adequately qualified for the Sydney position. Once more bearing in mind the importance of the position, I feel Mr. Berndt is not a serious candidate.<sup>25</sup>

What really stands out is the contradiction between Elkin's assessment and that of the external referees.

Freedman was treated more kindly. It was generally agreed that he was 'a sound, original scholar with a good critical mind' (Firth), possessed of 'a bright and lively mind' (Gluckman), who 'writes lucidly [and is] well versed in anthropological theory' (Schapera). As the youngest of the applicants, he had excellent potential, but time 'will tell' whether he could 'deliver the goods' (Gluckman). Nadel was clearer, and typically harsher, in his assessment: Freedman was 'a gifted young man but still rather immature and inexperienced'; definitely not suitable for 'such an important and responsible position as the Sydney Chair'. The one wholehearted supporter of

Freedman was Evans-Pritchard. Generally, Freedman's application was considered premature, and Kaberry summed up the general feeling: 'Mr. Freedman has a competent mind, but in my opinion lacks the personal and intellectual qualifications for a professorship at this stage of his career'.

Questions of politics, personal likes and dislikes, and old enmities are particularly evident in Stanner's case. Stanner's best references were from Firth and Nadel, who ranked him first equal. Whereas Freedman was considered a fine younger scholar but not yet ready for a chair, Stanner was largely seen as an older man who had little to show for his years of effort. Stanner would have been shocked to know the extent of his poor reputation, as evidenced in several of the referees' reports: Gluckman wondered whether Stanner had lost touch with recent developments in anthropology, Kaberry was of the opinion that Stanner's more recent publications were inferior to those of the 1930s and Forde spoke for many in saying that Stanner did 'not approach Dr Barnes in intellectual calibre and I would consider that he would not carry through research projects as effectively or elicit the same degree of sustained keenness in students'. An otherwise supportive Nadel, who praised Stanner's 'real 'flair' for problems of theory and method', also noted a readiness to get 'side-tracked'. The frequency with which proposed publications had fallen by the wayside reinforced the suspicion that Stanner had difficulty in seeing projects to a conclusion.

The remaining shortlisted candidate was Barnes, who by general consensus was the outstanding candidate. Most referees praised the quality of his mind, his abilities as a teacher as well as his collegiality and personal qualities. Forde summed up the general feeling:

Dr Barnes, on grounds of intellect, character and personality, is certainly the outstanding candidate. [He] is a man of very considerable intellectual distinction; he writes and speaks with exceptional clarity; he is generous and co-operative in his relations with colleagues and students, and of exceptionally equable temperament with a good sense of humour. He is widely read outside anthropology and has seen a good deal of the world. He is also very businesslike in all his professional activities.<sup>26</sup>

## THE COMMITTEE'S DECISION

Firth and Schapera had been asked to comment on Elkin's suggestion—which was a departure from the position description—that preference be given to candidates with knowledge and experience of 'the anthropology of the Australian aborigines and the peoples of New Guinea and Melanesia'. Neither considered this of 'very great importance'. Firth noted that the initial advantage of 'local experience' would diminish over time: 'As a general rule in such appointments regional experience counts for less than the quality of the man'. The committee accepted their view. As well, Kaberry, Gluckman and Schapera argued that the 'time has come when the Department requires stimulus of a broader theoretical and ethnographic approach',

which further undermined Elkin (and Capell's) pleadings for more of the same. The committee accepted the referees' advice, thus ensuring that Hogbin's worst nightmare—that the decision would come down to Berndt or Stanner—did not eventuate. Berndt and Freedman were eliminated. Stanner, by contrast, was not discounted, especially because he had been ranked first equal by Nadel and Firth. The committee, however, heeded the weight of evidence, which inevitably led to Barnes being the unanimous choice. The selection process had worked independently, and had resisted local interference, despite Elkin's strenuous attempts to have Berndt recruited (and also despite Hogbin working his mischief behind the scenes). The Professorial Board approved the decision and the unsuccessful applicants were notified on 9 November. Barnes attended his first Professorial Board meeting in May 1956.<sup>27</sup>

There are, however, two unresolved questions that arise over Stanner. Why did Nadel so strongly support Stanner, despite an awareness of the latter's shortcomings, some of which he itemised? One possibility is that Nadel wished Aboriginal anthropology to continue as the focus of the Sydney department and Stanner, in Nadel's view, was more worthy than Berndt. More cynically, Nadel might have wanted to get rid of his departmental colleague, although he did not rank Stanner ahead of Barnes. The second unresolved question is over Firth's support for Stanner, which is more difficult to understand. Far from applying his own standard of 'a frank estimate' of a candidate's strengths and weaknesses, he misrepresented Stanner's short stint in Uganda in 1948, saying that 'he made an excellent impression on officials and others in East Africa' when he acknowledged in a later reference that the opposite pertained.<sup>28</sup> More generally, Firth was well aware that Stanner's negativity and penchant for critique made him at times an unconstructive nuisance and inhibited his forging workable professional relationships (Mills 2008: 82, 99–100; Gray 2006: 153–160; cf. Hinkson 2008: 51; Pybus 1999: 88–90). One can only conjecture as to why Firth showed a particular leniency towards Stanner. They went back a long way—to Stanner's undergraduate days—and Stanner had always been loyal to Firth, even acting as amanuensis when Firth was composing his 1938 textbook *Human Types* (Husmann *et al.* 1993). It might even be that Firth, aware that Sydney was not averse to appointing Australian candidates, thought that Stanner had a real chance and so gave him every assistance. After all, in Firth's view, Stanner was, on balance, a better choice than Berndt, a view that accorded with the other referees.

### CHANGING COURSE?

Once appointed, Barnes tried to find out more about Sydney. In general, the people he spoke to 'who had knowledge about Sydney were encouraging without being enthusiastic' (Barnes 2007: 249). Nadel had alerted him to differences between a federally funded research-oriented university, the ANU, and the teaching orientation of a state-funded university, such as Sydney. Barnes found a department that was

underfunded, moribund, shackled and cluttered by its past. The parlous financial position dampened Barnes' plans: 'the practical effect is that the University has just enough money to retain those research students who are already in the middle of their projects, but scarcely any to spare for new applicants.'<sup>29</sup> Lack of funding also impacted on new positions: there was 'no money for any academic expansion. I discovered that with my arrival the number of staff positions in anthropology department had declined'.<sup>30</sup>

Nor was Elkin a benign presence. He semi-publicly lamented the appointment of Barnes and the consequent demise of Aboriginal anthropology.<sup>31</sup> More seriously, Elkin held on to the editorship of *Oceania*, contrary to his previous undertakings, thus depriving Barnes of the opportunity to influence the research agenda (Barnes 2001, 2007: 261).<sup>32</sup>

Barnes's attempts, limited as they were by funding, to introduce change in the practice and focus of social anthropology met considerable resistance (2007: 249–275). Barnes recalled that Hogbin and Capell had been in the department 'for a long time and indeed were significantly older than me in age and professional experience. They had built up their courses and wished to continue with them without major change. Hogbin's introductory lecture course had developed over the years into a polished piece of dramatic art, [the content of which] he had no intention of abandoning' (Barnes 2001: 143).

Nevertheless, after some 12 months in the job, Barnes wrote that 'the academic position is becoming clearer. I've dealt with my first set of examination results, and have a better idea of the level of student attainment and aspiration. I think something can be made of this department, but it's going to be quite a tough proposition!' He had six doctoral students but expressed confidence only in Mervyn Meggitt. He believed 'that part of the trouble has been that anthropology had come to be regarded, rightly, as an easy subject that did not take up much time or require much effort. Hence people came into the subject who needed an extra course or two to complete their degree requirements and who did not have any real interest in it'.<sup>33</sup>

In early 1956, Nadel died unexpectedly, and equally unexpectedly Barnes was offered a lifeline. The ANU had successively invited Edmund Leach (Cambridge) and Douglas L. Oliver (Harvard) to occupy the vacant chair, but both declined. Derek Freeman stepped in as Acting Head of Anthropology as Stanner, the most senior member of the department, was on leave or in the field for most of 1956; when Stanner returned in late November, he was appointed Head of Department for a period of 2 years in the belief that the chair needed to be one which was 'bid-dable', that is senior anthropologists would seek out ANU rather than ANU approaching likely candidates. L. G. Melville, the Vice-Chancellor, offered the Chair to Barnes in June 1957. A distraught Stanner, convinced that his quest for the chair had been deliberately stymied, described this turn of events as 'a breach of faith'.<sup>34</sup> Barnes remained at Sydney until his 2 years were up and he was relieved of the necessity to repay his fares and removal costs to the university (Barnes 2007: 251).

## SYDNEY REPRISED, 1958

Less than 3 years after Elkin's retirement, the Sydney chair had to be filled again. Fortune and Stanner applied again but Berndt, who had established himself at the University of Western Australia, decided against it. Berndt was also conscious of the opposition from Hogbin. In fact, Berndt was surprised that Hogbin 'finds me rather less objectionable than Stanner'.<sup>35</sup> The other applicants besides Stanner and Fortune were A. L. Epstein, W. R. Geddes, K. E. Read, F. R. Secoy,<sup>36</sup> M. C. Groves and P. M. Worsley, the only Aboriginalist besides Stanner. At its meeting of 5 March, Barnes discussed the applicants with the committee that comprised, with few exceptions, those who had appointed him in 1955. It met again on 23 April and narrowed the field to Epstein, Geddes and Read. By a majority of eight to two, Geddes was selected. The Professorial Board considered the recommendation but could not reach an agreement over Geddes and Epstein and referred the decision back to the selection committee.<sup>37</sup>

The committee reconvened on 8 May. What seems to have decided the matter was the contribution of N. W. Macintosh, Professor of Anatomy, who had been absent from the previous meeting. 'Black Mac', as he was often called, strongly supported Geddes on the basis of familiarity with his work. There is the probability that the fine hand of Elkin was again at work: he and Macintosh were old warriors in university politics (Wise 1985: 252, 258) and there may have been collusion over Geddes. The Committee re-affirmed its decision by seven votes to one. At its meeting on 28 May 1958, the Professorial Board again considered the recommendation of the committee and made its decision that Geddes be appointed by twenty-three votes to one.<sup>38</sup>

Unfortunately, the documentary evidence for the 1958 Sydney appointment is sparse, although it appears that Firth, who had supplied a reference for Geddes, was once again asked to rank the candidates.<sup>39</sup> Ronald Berndt, despite being in Perth, was well informed: he told Firth soon after that 'at least [Geddes'] appointment should break down a little the unhappy Sydney feud-situation. Although we [he and Catherine] were sorry about Mick [K. E.] Read (who is, after all, in much the same predicament that we are: too many teaching commitments etc. make it difficult to do as much writing as one would like), and surprised at the rebuff to Stanner, at least were very pleased that you supported Geddes so firmly against Epstein'.<sup>40</sup>

An obvious question, in the light of how close he came in 1955, is why Stanner was discarded so early in the selection process in 1958. Did the selection committee, supported by the Professorial Board and the Senate, make a decision, as it did in 1955, that it would no longer support Aboriginal anthropology as central for the department, and thereby discard both Aboriginalists? Stanner's application was late and he was careless enough to include two dead referees, Radcliffe-Brown and Nadel. It may have seemed to the selection committee that he was not serious and happy to remain at the ANU. Stanner, on the other hand, initially accused Barnes

‘of influencing the electors against him’ (Barnes 2007: 271). It appears to be an unfounded allegation. Barnes, however, supported Epstein against Geddes, and every indication is that Stanner was out of contention before Barnes was asked to comment.<sup>41</sup>

His late application, his low reputation among his anthropological peers and a confirmation that the Sydney department had shifted from Australian Aboriginal ethnography may all have worked against Stanner. An answer to the failure of his application may be found in Firth’s assessment of Stanner for the ANU chair in 1957. ANU sought Firth’s views not only on Stanner’s academic distinction but particularly on his ‘suitability as Head of a large Department with very great opportunities for constructive research’.<sup>42</sup> Firth noted Stanner’s strengths, especially his training in economics and his interest in politics, his ‘intelligence and insight and admired his grasp of broad subjects’. His reservations, however, contradicted what he said less than 2 years earlier:

in a way Stanner’s achievement has tended to fall short of expectation and very far short of his own ideal. In some ways he has been his own worst academic enemy. Essentially he has seemed unwilling to face responsibility. His refusal of the Directorship of the East African Institute of Social Research was symptomatic of his tendency to dwell upon the difficulties inherent in the situation rather than the possibilities of what can be made out of it. His desire for a really worth while achievement sometimes makes him over-elaborate his argument.<sup>43</sup>

After these setbacks, Stanner oscillated ‘between trying to stage a comeback and retiring’. He was certainly unhappy with the way he had been treated, feeling with some justification that he had been betrayed by the university selection committee. He let these personal feelings dominate and left his colleagues, including the new professor, to carry the burden of supervision. He also provided no assistance to the incoming head of department by spending 20 of the next 24 months at Port Keats.<sup>44</sup>

Stanner had to wait until 6 years before his retirement to be awarded a chair. In 1964, he was recruited to the second Chair in Anthropology at the ANU. Elkin, congratulating him somewhat hypocritically, wrote: ‘you have had an unnecessarily long wait—a delay not unconnected with the machinations, which have had no relation with anthropology as an academic discipline’.<sup>45</sup> Stanner, however, proved his critics wrong. He went on to become one of Australia’s ‘best known and highly regarded anthropologists’. His ‘writings and ideas on Aboriginal culture and affairs continue to be cited by observers from a range of perspectives, both within and outside the academy’ (Hinkson & Beckett 2008: 1).

## CONCLUSION

Elkin’s retirement sealed a decade long marginalisation of Aboriginal anthropology, which had started soon after the end of the Pacific War and went hand in hand

with a broadening of interests and theoretical concerns of post–World War II social anthropology (Gray 1994; Gray 2001a,b; Stocking 1995; Mills 2008). The selection committees for the Sydney chair in 1955 and 1958 disregarded Elkin's advice to continue to focus on Aboriginal Australia and its immediate neighbourhood. His vision for the future of Aboriginal anthropology was put aside in favour of general scholarship and personal attributes that promised a strong, competent successor and change.

The change that was seemingly initiated with the appointment of Barnes did not occur; rather, it was Geddes who brought about a change in direction by shifting the focus of the department onto Southeast Asia, particularly Thailand. Barnes had more success at ANU where the focus was on the ethnography of the New Guinea Highlands (Barnes 1962, 1966; Wilson & Young 1996; Hays 1992). Aboriginalist Anthropology continued to languish at both universities.

At Sydney, there was a movement away from interacting directly with the development of government policy and advising on matters to do with the welfare and advancement of Aboriginal people, but such activities were not entirely discounted by Geddes who supported and assisted the Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs, chairing it between 1964 and 1970 (Clark 2008: 167; Horton 1994: 388).<sup>46</sup> Geddes believed that anthropology was important as a force for cross-cultural understanding, tolerance and appropriate action. The appointments of Hiatt and Beckett in the early 1960s, however, led to a resurgence of sorts of Aboriginal anthropology. Geddes, while he maintained an interest in Fiji and Sarawak, shifted the focus to Southeast Asia, particularly Thailand, and in 1965 helped establish the Tribal Research Centre in Thailand. This left a legacy that remains controversial and unresolved to this day (Hinton 2002; Miles 2008).

Only Berndt at the University of Western Australia (UWA) remained true to what might loosely be thought of as Elkinian anthropology (Gray 2005: 101–02; Tonkinson & Howard 1990: 17, 23, 38; Beckett 2001). UWA remained a bastion, along with the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, established in 1964, of Aboriginalist Anthropology. The Berndts were, indeed, Elkin's 'anthropological children'.

The indifference of referees and selection committee members to a continuation of Aboriginal anthropology at the University of Sydney was partly because of a lack of suitable candidates in the field. Elkin's long and dominant reign had masked its demise and at the same time advanced it. When he left, there were, apart from Berndt and Stanner, no contenders with the expertise or interest in this field of anthropology. Those Australians who had started with or had been linked to Australian Aboriginal anthropology through the Sydney department had deserted it for greener pastures, viz. Ralph Piddington, C. W. M. Hart and Phyllis Kaberry. Of the younger generation, only Mervyn Meggitt and L. R. Hiatt were working on traditional Aboriginal research (for further discussion of the state of anthropological research at Sydney, see Gray 2001a,b: 1–29). Elkin had been appointed, in part, because both Radcliffe-Brown and Firth had left, and an Australian such as Elkin was likely to remain in the post. This certainly weighed on Elkin when he argued

for a continuation of the discipline through his chosen successor, R. M. Berndt. The particularity of the situation at Sydney that led to Elkin's appointment, namely funding a crisis endangering the continuation of university-based anthropology, was of no concern, however, in the mid-1950s. Anthropology at Sydney was firmly established and slowly expanding.

Australian anthropology under Elkin had seen a *Sonderweg*, disconnected to wider anthropological endeavours, and it took until the mid-1960s, in the context of political and intellectual changes, for Aboriginal anthropology to undergo a revival. This was attributable, in part, to increased funding for universities and the establishment of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies in Canberra (Barnes 2001: 141). Barnes, summing up these developments, was moved to observe that with the publication of L. R. Hiatt's *Kinship and Conflict* (1965), Australian anthropology had moved from being a 'regional backwater' to 'the mainstream of social enquiry' (Barnes 1965: ix).

## NOTES

- 1 This is part of our ongoing research on professorial appointments in anthropology in the Antipodes, 1920–1960. We thank Tim Causer for his inspired research assistance among London archival repositories; Julia Mant at the University of Sydney Archives. Christine Winter, Michael Young, Cyril Belshaw and Jeremy Beckett commented on earlier versions. We would also like to thank Raymond Firth and John Barnes for earlier discussions on some of these matters.
- 2 Raymond Firth, Personal communication, 23 February 1993.
- 3 Stanner was appointed Reader in Comparative Institutions in 1949 and from 1951 undertook intensive field research at Port Keats.
- 4 Near the end of his life, Elkin wrote to the Berndts, 'you are, if I may say so, my anthropological children – of whom I am proud'. The sentiment was reciprocated: Ronald and Catherine wrote, 'we looked upon him as our close classificatory father' (Berndt & Berndt 1979: 8).
- 5 Berndt to Elkin, 21 August 1954, University of Sydney Archives, Elkin Papers (hereafter EP), 41/4/2/375.
- 6 Elkin to Firth, 3 August 1936, FIRTH 8/2/3, Archive of Sir Raymond Firth, British Archive of Political and Economic Science, London School of Economics.
- 7 Firth to Copland, 25 January 1949, FIRTH 7/5/81.
- 8 Elkin to Registrar (University of Sydney), 12 April 1955, EP, 41/4/2/375.
- 9 Berndt to Registrar, 15 April 1955, University of Sydney Archives, 'Chair of Anthropology 1955', G3/190 (hereafter abbreviated to G3/190). This is the consolidated University of Sydney file containing the job description and information for candidates as well as the instructions to referees, applications, referees' reports and the deliberations of the Committee. Henceforth, details taken from the file will not be footnoted, except in the case of indented quotations or in the interest of clarity.
- 10 Hogbin to Firth, 11 April 1955, FIRTH 8/1/52.
- 11 Hogbin to Firth, 20 April 1955, and, 6 June 1955, FIRTH 8/1/52. Belshaw has no recollection of having applied for the chair (personal communication, 10 January 2010).



- 12 Hogbin to Firth, 6 June 1955, FIRTH 8/1/52.
- 13 Firth to Hogbin, 15 June 1955, FIRTH 8/1/52.
- 14 Hogbin to Firth, 16 June 1955, FIRTH 8/1/52.
- 15 The committee consisted of Professors: C. R. McRae, Education, Deputy Vice-Chancellor Sydney University 1955–61; William M. O'Neil, Psychology, Chairman, Professorial Board; Sir Edward Ford, Preventive Medicine and Director of the School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine; Julius Stone, Law; N. Butlin, Economic History; Alexander G. Mitchell, Early English Literature and Language; Patrick Desmond Fitzgerald Murray, Zoology; Alan K. Stout, Philosophy; John Manning Ward (History); Arthur Denis Winston, Town and Country Planning.
- 16 Rev. Percival Hadfield, who was 'reading for a PhD' at Reading, and who had written several books on Africa, used the Duke of Devonshire and the Archdeacon of Sheffield as his referees. He had no academic social anthropological support.
- 17 Robert Gayre, a Scottish physical anthropologist, supporter of race science and author of several works on heraldry, had no significant anthropological work to his name at that point. He was a founder of *Mankind Quarterly*, which started publication in 1960.
- 18 'Resume of Elkin', G3/190.
- 19 Barnes to Firth, 29 April 1955, and 14 May 1955, FIRTH 8/1/3.
- 20 Firth to Copland, 25 January 1949, FIRTH 7/5/8.
- 21 Firth to Stanner, 12 August 1949, FIRTH 7/7/31.
- 22 Stanner to Firth, 5 August 1949, FIRTH 7/7/31.
- 23 Firth to Stanner, 11 March 1955, FIRTH 7/7/31.
- 24 Even Elkin conceded the point, although in a more private context. Regarding a book which the Berndts hoped to publish, he commented: 'I agree with you ... they are apt to repeat a good deal and to take somewhat longer to say things than is really necessary'. Elkin to Linden A. Mander, 8 August 1946. University of Washington Library (Seattle), Mander Papers, 730-7-55, box 5, folder 5-4.
- 25 S. F. Nadel to Registrar, 10 July 1955, G3/190.
- 26 C. Daryll Forde to Registrar, 4 July 1955, G3/190.
- 27 Tonkinson and Howard (1990: 32), state that Berndt was 'relieved when Barnes was appointed'. This is contrary to the documentary evidence (see also Gray 2005).
- 28 Firth to ANU Registrar, 25 July 1957, FIRTH 8/1/3.
- 29 Barnes to Firth, 4 January 1957, FIRTH 8/1/3. For a discussion of the department see Barnes 2007: 261–67.
- 30 Barnes 2001: 143; also Barnes to Firth, 4 January 1957, FIRTH 8/1/3.
- 31 Elkin to Giese, 11 November 1955, EP, 189/4/42/455.
- 32 With the demise of the ANRC (being replaced by the academy of Science) the publisher of *Oceania* was the University of Sydney, starting with vol. 25 (Elkin to Adam, 24 November 1955. EP, 41/4/2/362).
- 33 Barnes to Firth, 4 January 1957, FIRTH 8/1/3.
- 34 Stanner to J. W. Davidson, 15 August 1957. Davidson Papers, Australian National University Archives, 57/30.
- 35 Berndt to Firth, 22 November 1957, and Firth to Berndt, 28 November 1957, FIRTH 8/1/8.
- 36 Frank Secoy was author of a slim volume on *Changing Military Patterns on the Great Plains (17th Century Through Early 19th Century)*, published in 1953. His second and final book (a revision of the original work) was published almost 40 years later.

- 37 Professorial Board Minutes, 30 April 1958, 175–76, University of Sydney Archives.
- 38 Professorial Board Minutes, 28 May 1958, 177–78, University of Sydney Archives. It appears that in both instances Julius Stone was the dissenting vote. Barnes to Gluckman, 23 April 1958, Gluckman Papers, RAI, MS 450.
- 39 Geddes to Firth, 1 May 1958, (Chiengmai). FIRTH 8/1/36.
- 40 Berndt to Firth, 29 May 1958, FIRTH 8/1/8; see also Gray 2008.
- 41 Barnes to Gluckman, 23 April 1958, Gluckman Papers, RAI, MS 450.
- 42 Ross Hohnen (ANU Registrar) to Firth, 27 June 1957, FIRTH 8/1/3.
- 43 Firth to Hohnen, 25 July 1957, FIRTH 8/1/3.
- 44 Barnes to Gluckman, 25 March 1957, Gluckman Papers, MS 450; also Gray and Munro, unpublished data.
- 45 Elkin to Stanner, 10 June 1964, cited in Beckett and Hinkson (2008: 22).
- 46 Importantly he opened introductory Anthropology to first year students who hitherto had been thought too young to do anthropology (Golson 2007: 425–426).

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