

# REVIEWS

## W.H.R. Rivers: Pioneer Anthropologist, Psychiatrist of The Ghost Road

Jane Tucker

Richard Slobodin. Sutton, 1997, £12.99

You young friskies who to-day  
Jump and fight in Father's hay  
With bows and and arrows and wooden spears,  
Playing at Royal Welch Fusiliers,  
Happy though these hours you spend,  
Have they warned you how games end?

[Robert Graves, "The Next War"]

That W.H.R. Rivers' name is now firmly anchored to his association with Robert Graves, possibly with Wilfred Owen, and more especially with Siegfried Sassoon, is a testament to his pioneering work in untangling some of the messier ends by which the 'game of war' could end, or at least be interrupted. It is also a testament to Rivers' popular rediscovery through the success of Pat Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy. The new edition of Slobodin's biography, first published in 1978, overtly acknowledges this association by titling the work 'Pioneer Anthropologist, Psychiatrist of *The Ghost Road*' and printing an endorsement by Barker on the front cover, which also features a photo of First World War soldiers—tattered, wounded and downcast—beneath the benign face of Rivers. The publisher's press release at the time of publication notes that a film version of *Regeneration* is due for release in the autumn/winter of 1997. The stage is set for a sales boom: see the movie/read the novel/read the biography behind the novel! Barker has mined the life of Rivers well, and given to us a somewhat enigmatic but nevertheless very human character, better at dealing with other men's ghosts than with his own. Slobodin's biography offers us a chance to get to know the man himself a little better, and one portion of his life's work, anthropology, very much better.

Born in 1864 into a Kentish family of Cambridge, Church and naval

traditions, William Halse Rivers had a life which surpassed those traditions and reflected more the interests of his mother's brother, Thomas Hunt. Hunt had built a career on treating speech impediments, an interest which originally arose from his Cambridge student days' friendship with a stammerer. He was also passionate about anthropology, and founded the Anthropological Society in 1863 after a falling out with the Ethnographical Society of London. He died, still young, in 1869, but Rivers was to devote his own life to work in the same or related fields. Rivers' father Henry, a cleric, took over his brother-in-law's practice after 1869 and continued to treat Hunt's patients, including the Rev. Charles Dodgson (Lewis Carroll) and six of Dodgson's seven sisters. Ironically, Rivers suffered from a lifelong stammer, though his difficulties lessened as he grew older and heeded his own advice simply to 'forget the trouble and leave it alone' (78). A serious illness, which may also have been the cause of his indifferent health as an adult, meant the young Rivers missed his scholarship examination for Cambridge and instead chose to study medicine at the University of London. He entered St Bartholomew's, one of the University's three teaching hospitals, where he was exposed to people from widely varied ethnic and social backgrounds. The awareness of their own genealogies amongst immigrant patients and the need to meticulously record the patients' medical histories would appear to have been significant to his development of the skills he was to use in his future work. Wider contacts were made while in his 20s by travel to Japan as a ship's surgeon and a spell in Germany. Reports and papers from this time show his growing interest in neurology and psychiatry, as well as his substantive work in the physiology of the nervous system. By the end of his 1892 sojourn in Germany he declared his intention to 'go in for insanity when I return to England' (13). The following year he was finally to become a Cambridge man, appointed to teach the physiology of the sense organs, and for the rest of his life his permanent home was to be St John's College. His stammer may have contributed to his reserve in mixed company (although he himself once noted that he simply 'didn't see enough of women' (40)), but it was certainly the serendipitous cause of his writing out his lectures fully, thus preserving them for posterity. Slobodin suggests that for Rivers, with his teaching post (held concurrently with London teaching responsibilities), his limited physical stamina, and an uphill struggle fighting for resources for the fledgling psychology laboratories in both cities, being 'untouched by the responsibilities of domestic

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life' was a boon to his remarkable productivity. This sounds a trifle old-fashioned—or maybe wistful (18). Rivers himself remained modest throughout about his professional achievements.

In 1898 came a voyage of discovery for Rivers, in more ways than one. Till then, he had been so little interested in anthropology that he had declined an offer of his uncle's anthropology library. He joined, after first declining, an expedition organised by zoologist and nascent anthropologist A.C. Haddon. The Torres Strait Expedition to the area immediately north of Australia was tasked with studying 'primitive mentality' and its possible distinguishing characteristics. We can only surmise Rivers' late decision to join the group came from the fact that two of his students were participating and from his own strong sense of adventure. Whatever the reason, the trip changed his life, for he was to discover a new passion. He would later remark that he was married to psychology but that anthropology was his mistress (186). Rivers' fieldwork was focussed on an investigation of vision, and yielded him the conclusion that perception is culturally conditioned. But he also began a study of kinship that was to lead him in 1901-02 to spend several months in southwest India amongst pastoral hill people, and which resulted in the classic and once popular study in ethnography *The Todas* (published in 1906). A further year-long trip to Melanesia and Polynesia in 1907-08 produced his 1914 *The History of Melanesian Society*, reprinted more than 50 years later; his *Kinship and Social Organisation* lectures, also published in 1914, are now considered a landmark in the anthropological landscape.

The growing popular interest in anthropology had been fanned by a strong anthropological coterie in Cambridge, including James Frazer, author of *The Golden Bough*. But Rivers had now to share his time between his new passion and his old love, experimental psychology. The opening decade of the new century found him conducting two significant series of experiments. The first studied the influence of alcohol and other drugs on fatigue, with himself as a willing participant; he must surely have delighted in combining his two disciplines in his study of *Kava Drinking in Melanesia* (published in 1910). The second series, known famously as the Head-Rivers experiment, sought to analyse the peripheral sensory mechanism by severing nerves in the arm of Henry Head, a neurophysiologist colleague, with Rivers then recording the pattern of sensation until normal sensitivity returned. One can only be thankful for both men that the experiment, which was conducted over a total of 167 days between 1903-07, took place in

Rivers' rather comfortable College study (two delightful though poorly reproduced photographs of the experiment are amongst those included by Slobodin) rather than the 'damp, dark, and ill-ventilated' rat-infested cottage on Mill Lane which at that time housed his laboratory (37).

That Rivers saw his work as part of a continuum and not necessarily as disciplines competing for his attention, is reflected in his opening remarks as co-editor of the *British Journal of Psychology*, which he founded in 1904 with James Ward and Charles Myers: "Ideas" in the philosophical sense do not fall within its scope; its inquiries are restricted to "facts". In pursuit of these it is brought into close relation with biology, physiology, pathology and again with philology, anthropology, and even literature' (36). Interestingly, he was elected Fellow of the Royal Society at the same November 1908 meeting as Bertrand Russell.

The outbreak of World War I found Rivers on the opposite side of the world, attending an historic meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science in Australia, along with many leading international colleagues (and some like Malinowski who would later become leading figures). So absorbed by his anthropological studies was Rivers that he undertook more field work in Oceania and meetings and lectures in New Zealand; he did not reach England again until the spring of 1915. Seeking to contribute his services to the war effort, he received a civilian appointment as psychiatrist at Maghull Military Hospital in July. Thus began a period of intense and exhausting work (from which his only relaxation was working on research papers!). This war provided a pressure-cooker environment in which to learn about and seek remedies for those 'whose minds the Dead have ravished', as Wilfred Owen would describe war neuroses. The phenomenon of physical and behavioural breakdowns without wounds or organic ailments, popularly described as 'shell shock', which the new combination of high explosive shells and trench warfare produced, was hitherto unknown on the scale now seen; psychiatry was also still very much learning to crawl, let alone up and running. Leonard Woolf had been moved to observe the complete lack of success eminent practitioners of the day (including Henry Head) had had in treating Virginia Woolf during a period of acute mental breakdown in 1913-15.

By 1916 Rivers, now a Captain in the Royal Army Medical Corps, was transferred to Craiglockhart Hospital for Officers, christened

'Dottyville' by its most famous patient, Siegfried Sassoon. Sassoon had been brought for rehabilitation to Craiglockhart by Robert Graves and the hospital was the setting for both poets' first meeting with Rivers, and the establishment of lasting personal friendships with him for both. But by the end of the following year the exhaustion induced by the work took its toll on Rivers. Torn between loyalty to his patients and a desire to return to London, he went on sick leave, then took up a new post as psychologist to the Royal Flying Corps. His pioneering work on aviation psychology involved a rather different kind of field-work, in a type of aircraft well known to be accident prone.

By the end of the war, an immensely more self-confident and outgoing Rivers had emerged. There are a number of contemporary commentaries on this sea-change written by his friends and colleagues. Insofar as an explanation is inferred, it seems that his work as a therapist had engaged him in a confrontation with his own demons and a coming to terms with ghosts. His posthumously published *Conflict and Dream* explores much of Rivers' thinking about and analysis of his own subconscious. His move from conservatism, an unquestioning traditionalism, had manifested itself in a shift from support for the war to favouring a negotiated settlement; ironically, the same view that had seen Sassoon sent to Craiglockhart to be 'cured'. His acquaintance with the likes of G. B. Shaw and Bertrand Russell flourished in the aftermath of war, and he used his 1919 appointment as St John's College's Praelector of Natural Science Studies to open his doors, famously on Sundays, to science and other students, and to foster lectures and discussions by leading figures such as H. G. Wells and Sassoon. He proved a memorable and inspiring mentor and teacher to his students, many of whose recollections are quoted to good effect by Slobodin. It is as if Rivers comes alive on the page at this point, though always through the writings of others: he is seldom quoted on anything not directly related to his work, for personal papers are no longer in evidence. His interest in the convergence of mind and culture continued unabated (although some colleagues, stunned by the new-look Rivers, considered him now incautious and lacking his previous good sense). Further, he aligned himself publicly with psychoanalysis (though diverging from some of Freud's theories) despite it being still greatly controversial and even reviled.

In 1921 he followed in his uncle's footsteps as president of the Royal Anthropological Institute. But he continued to explore the area 'where psychology, sociology, and ethnology converge. Here he developed

ideas on the nature of instinct, the interpretation of dreams, the development of neuroses, the relationship of myth and dream, symbolism as an expression of and an aspect of culture. A reading of his later work strongly suggests that he saw all of these themes as interrelated' (74). In addition, his interest in trade union education and his reformed ideas on society allowed him to be persuaded to accept nomination as the official Labour Party candidate for the University of London seat. His nailing of socialist colours to the mast upset many of his academic friends but won the accolades of others. Bertrand Russell described him as 'devoid of political ambition [and] exclusively actuated by public motives'. (80) But this was to be one arena in which Rivers was not to have the opportunity to contribute. He died, unexpectedly, of an intestinal blockage on 4 June 1922. As befitted one with a strong ethnographical interest in ritual and mortuary rites, he had planned his own funeral at his beloved St John's, in detail.

So ends the 'Life' of W. H. R. Rivers, but this biographical account is only the first quarter of Slobodin's complete volume. What follows is focussed almost entirely on Rivers' anthropological bequest. Subsequent sections are divided neatly into 'Work' and 'Selected Writings' and all relate, with the exception of the final chapter in 'Work', entitled 'Rivers in Retrospect', to his career as an anthropologist. This section places him in his contemporary context as well as assessing his position in current anthropological thinking and allows his writings to speak for themselves. There is a brief but useful glossary for the general reader; a detailed bibliography for the more committed reader reveals the extensive research behind the text. But despite the heavy concentration on anthropology in the latter two sections, one is left with an impression of Rivers' own extraordinary breadth of interests and, despite his characteristic reserve, the warmth with which he was remembered. Sassoon recalls him in his poem 'Revisitation 1934, Dr W.H.R. Rivers' and in *Sherston's Progress*, but to Graves I leave the last poignant words, in his description of Rivers' room in 'The Red Ribbon Dream':

For that was the place where I longed to be  
And past all hope where the kind lamp shone.