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# **A collector of ideas: Roland Burrage Dixon and the beginnings of professional American anthropology in the Pacific**

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The Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, founded in 1866, was the seedbed of Harvard's anthropology department under the 40-year leadership of Frederic Ward Putnam, the man typically cast as the 'Father of American Archaeology'. When the museum was started with the philanthropist George Peabody's commitment of \$150,000 to the care of the Harvard trustees for the development of a museum and establishment of a related professorship, its explicit focus (as the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology) was to explore the origins of 'the aboriginal races of North and South America' (Annual Report of the Trustees of the Peabody Museum for 1868).

Despite this specific directive, Oceanic collections comprised a significant contribution to its holdings from the very start, reflecting the USA's early interests in the Pacific region. The museum's Pacific collections expanded very early – in part due to an appeal for specimens in the form of a printed circular, which initially asked for contributions of Native American materials (Annual Report of the Trustees of the Peabody Museum for 1868). Nearly one-third of the people who replied to that advertisement

were residents of the coast of Massachusetts, bringing in collections from the Pacific Islands, not the Americas (Watson et al. 1996). They were primarily acquired through New England's eighteenth- and nineteenth-century seafaring endeavours, beginning with the lucrative maritime fur trade that connected Russian, American and British traders to the Indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest Coast, the local and trading communities of coastal China, and multiple Pacific Islander communities along the route. The maritime fur trade became critical to the fledgling USA in the 1780s. The country had been recently successful in its struggle for political independence but was now driven to establish its economic autonomy. New England's merchants needed a way to escape the depression that had followed the American Revolutionary War and had closed access to British ports. These new American citizens had to seek new commercial markets, new trading partners and new sea routes to market those American products and to sustain the national economy. Post-revolution, New England ships gradually found their way into the ports of the Baltic, the Mediterranean and around the Cape of Good Hope to the Indies. Circa 1783, three sloops (the *Harriet*, the *Empress of China* and the *Hope*) left Boston for Canton, probing the market, and within just a couple of decades American vessels setting sail for the Pacific Ocean arguably outnumbered those from all other countries. Thanks to the writings associated with Captain Cook's voyages (including those of crew member John Ledyard, a Connecticut man), ships began to engage in multi-sited trans-Pacific trade, ushering in a new era of increased contact with and exploitation of the Pacific region (Gray 2007; Malloy 1998).

As ships' crews returned to the shores of Newburyport and the surrounding towns of Essex County in Massachusetts, individual collections from the Pacific and beyond obtained during their journeys were amassed in family cabinets, closets and sheds, many eventually finding their way to the Peabody Museum. With the inclusion of these collections and those of early scientific voyages like the US Exploring Expedition of 1838–42 (see Scates Frances, **Chapter 6**, this volume), the expertise developing at the Peabody Museum turned its burgeoning comparative techniques on civilisations beyond the Americas, spawning Harvard's scholarly interest in the peoples of the Pacific and training its earliest professors.

One such scholar was Roland Burrage Dixon, whom histories of American anthropology and archaeology in the Pacific almost entirely overlook. Born in Worcester, Massachusetts, in 1875, Dixon undertook all of his

formal education at Harvard University. He took an early interest in anthropology and archaeology, studying the topic for his bachelor's degree and, in 1896, participating in archaeological fieldwork in Ohio led by the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology (Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology 1896–97:249). Dixon's earliest research and fieldwork focused on Native American populations. His early career years were devoted to the study of the Maidu people of northern California, for which he received his doctorate at Harvard in 1900, becoming the sixth American to receive a degree in anthropology.

Following his bachelor's degree in 1897, under instruction from the 'father of American Archaeology' Frederic Ward Putnam (Morse 1915:6), then director of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Dixon regularly travelled to New York to receive training on 'Indian languages and ethnology' from the 'father of American Anthropology' Franz Boas, who at the time was jointly appointed at Columbia University and the American Museum of Natural History (Browman and Williams 2013:210; Darnell 1970:206–222; Holloway 1997). Boas enlisted the then student Dixon to join him and his team to the Northwest Coast as a member of the Jesup North Pacific Expedition – Boas's ambitious trans-Pacific investigations of the Bering Strait renowned as the 'foremost expedition in the history of American anthropology' (Freed et al. 1988:7). After work in British Columbia, Dixon was tasked between 1895 and 1905 with documenting the Maidu, Shasta and a variety of other Native American groups in California, resulting in:

seminal ethnographies on the Shasta and Maidu; the identification of the two major California Indian linguistic stocks, Hokan and Penutian; a dissertation on California Indian languages; a monograph on Maidu myth and folktale; two of the first academic publications on basketry; and 650 Maidu artifacts for the American Museum of Natural History anthropology collections. (Bernstein 1993:20)

While Dixon would periodically continue to publish on the Maidu (in all, three books and 28 articles, including works on the Indian tribes of the USA for the Census Bureau), following his doctoral studies his geographic focus began to shift, or at least expand, towards Oceania. It is difficult to tease out the exact or direct events that precipitated this shift, as much of Dixon's papers and correspondence were reportedly destroyed at his death

(Bernstein 1993; Browman and Williams 2013).<sup>1</sup> However, it is clear that his scholarly regard for the region was solidified by at least 1903, when he introduced the first course in the USA on the peoples of Oceania. The subject 'Ethnology of Polynesia and Australia' became the seventh anthropology course offered at Harvard and the first one to branch away from its foundational focus on North America and Europe.

It is likely that Dixon's broader interest and extensive academic reading in anthropological theory, as well as the circulating contemporary debates regarding the origins of races, cultural change and diffusionism at the turn of the century, played a role in his moving interest and specialisation towards the Pacific. Dixon, whom Boas referred to as a 'man of wide general reading' (in Hinsley 1992:137) and who was versant in several languages, was appointed the Peabody's librarian in 1904, during which time he vastly increased its holdings with 'complete sets of the serial publications of the anthropological societies and museums in various parts of the world' (Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology 1906–07:302).

Museum collections also significantly contributed to his geographic shift, for as he notes: 'In most branches of knowledge that are pursued in Harvard University, laboratories, museums and libraries are the outgrowth of teaching and research. In anthropology, the order is reversed' (Dixon 1930:202). Indeed, the origins of anthropology and its professionalisation at Harvard were inextricably linked to the foundation of the Peabody Museum in 1866, a museum–department model that many other universities in the US tried to emulate (Hinsley 1992). In 1900, Dixon was sent to Berlin for the months of February and May, studying the collections in the Museum für Völkerkunde, 'especially the Pacific Coast and Polynesian material', perhaps inspired both by his own Northwest Coast fieldwork and the Peabody Museum's vast Oceanic collections (Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology 1900–01:271).

Between 1895 and 1905, Alexander Agassiz (the son of Harvard's Museum of Comparative Zoology controversial founder Louis Agassiz) was leading several groundbreaking United States Fish Commission

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1 Bernstein (1993) reports this rumour, and Browman and Williams (2013) repeat it (citing Bernstein), although neither point to primary sources to substantiate it. Indeed, there are scant records and notebooks of Dixon's at Harvard, a notable dearth that has perpetuated the rumours.

Expeditions across the region aboard the *Albatross*.<sup>2</sup> Alongside William McM. Woodworth from Harvard, and Charles H. Townsend and Henry F. Moore from the Smithsonian Institution, the crew of naturalists, zoologists and fishery experts, in addition to their fish and bathymetrical research, also amassed a large ethnographic collection of nearly 3,000 objects from Fiji, Cook Islands, Tonga, Tahiti, Samoa, Niue, Marshall Islands, Pohnpei, Chuuk, Kosrae, Hawai'i, Marquesas, Paumotu, Society Islands, Mangareva and Rapa Nui. These objects were collected alongside hundreds of photographs and drawings and combined represent one of the largest American collecting expeditions. Dixon studied and included many of these collections, notably the model canoes, in his books *Oceanic Mythology* and *The Building of Cultures* (Figure 20.1).



**Figure 20.1. Model of an outrigger canoe (*vaka*) from Tatakoto Atoll in the Tuamotu Islands, collected by Alexander Agassiz while aboard the US Fish Commission steamer *Albatross* 1904–05.**

Gift of Alexander Agassiz, 1905.

Source: © President and Fellows of Harvard College, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology (PM05-2-70/64866).

2 Alexander Agassiz had already travelled to the Pacific Islands and Australia. Overall, with five expeditionary voyages to the Pacific (1891, 1895, 1897–98, 1899–1900 and 1904–05), his collections account for thousands of cultural resources from the region held at the Peabody Museum.



**Figure 20.2. Hevehe and eharo masks from the Elema District of Papua New Guinea, on display at the Peabody Museum, c. 1893. Museum Collection.**

Source: © President and Fellows of Harvard College, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology (PM2004.24.1121).

Furthermore, in 1891 the museum had purchased 130 objects from Australian naturalist and collector A.P. Goodwin, obtained as part of the Mount Owen Stanley Expedition in Papua New Guinea in 1889.<sup>3</sup> The extensive materials from the Elema District, featuring a number of large *hevehe* and *eharo* masks, were packed 20 to a display case shortly after arrival at the Peabody Museum for showcasing to the world (Figure 20.2).

The South Seas and Mount Owen Stanley collections are some of the major and significant Oceanic collections obtained by the Peabody Museum between 1890 and 1905, and together with other notable collections (Accession 99-12) acquired from Boston Museum of Natural History and Charles Willson Peale's Museum in Philadelphia, illustrate the magnitude of Oceanic material culture that was flooding into the Peabody Museum during the same period that Dixon was studying

3 Neary three decades later, Goodwin sold another 137 objects from the same collecting period and region (Accession 18-25).

and teaching there. It was also during this time that the anthropology department and the Peabody Museum were undergoing major changes and expansion as interest in the field of anthropology grew in its efforts to professionalise the field. The new Warren Ethnological Gallery of the Peabody Museum opened to the public in May of 1898, exhibiting 'a very valuable collection of clothing, ornaments, spears, models of boats and similar objects collected in Australia, Polynesia, Hawaii, Samoa, the Fiji Islands, and the Northwest coast of America' (*The Harvard Crimson*, 10 May 1898).

While Dixon travelled widely for his work, he only made one trip to the Pacific region, in 1909. He set sail from Seattle, Washington, on 18 June aboard the TSS *Makura* to explore the Pacific, making him the first professionally trained American anthropologist to investigate the region firsthand. After stopping in Honolulu, where he visited the Bishop Museum, he docked in Suva, Fiji, in early July. Dixon was taken by the beauty of the island and its inhabitants, declaring to his Harvard friends via a personal quarterly newsletter;

The people are physically the most splendid I ever saw. Tall, finely built and muscled. They do not tend so much to fat as the Polynesians do. Their hair in a magnificent pompadour four inches long is either black or light brown, having been bleached with lime. They have often very fine strong faces and are very animated talkers, full of fun and are very kind and hospitable to the stranger. Their walk is a revelation in what dignity can be [...] Of the country I can say little, for it would take tomes to describe its beauties. (Circular Quarterly 1902–1952, Houghton Library Harvard University)

While in Fiji, Dixon explored the region of Viti Levu on foot and by canoe, guided by his 'Fijian boy', who was the son of one of the big chiefs (but unnamed by Dixon). From Fiji, he moved on to Aotearoa/New Zealand, visiting both the North and South Islands. Here he met with curators at both the Canterbury and Auckland museums. While in the North Island Dixon also made a visit to meet Stephenson Percy Smith in New Plymouth, as noted in Smith's personal diary (Alexander Turnbull Library, Stephenson Percy Smith diary entry, ATL MS-2008, p. 67).

During Dixon's stay in Christchurch he was interviewed by a reporter for *The Press* (4 August 1909), where he commented on the purpose of his trip, his research interest and his positive opinion of the work undertaken by New Zealand researchers, as debated within the pages of the Polynesian Society. He states:

One thing of interest here, is that there is evidence of a sporadic contact of people from the Pacific with the people of America. One cannot say yet that there is more than a mere probability of this contact, and it is entirely out of the question that the origin of the people is to be sought in the Pacific as some people suppose. A few features may however, have been derived from the suggestions of the Polynesian people who have drifted ashore onto the coast of America. If people came ashore they would have speedily been absorbed or killed off by the Indians. Nothing survived except the idea of the plank canoe, which is a typical Polynesian thing, untypical of America and yet it is to be found on the Californian coast and the coast of Chile. (*The Press*, 4 August 1909)

This interview, and Dixon's trip, was then reported in multiple news outlets in both New Zealand and Australia (*Australasian*, Saturday 21 August 1909, p. 55; *Dominion*, 4 August 1909; *New Zealand Herald*, 4 August 1909; *Taranaki Daily News*, 5 August 1909). By mid-August Dixon had set sail for Australia aboard the TSS *Manuka*, stopping first in Hobart, Tasmania, and then onto the mainland. While in Australia he again prioritised visiting notable museums, such as the Adelaide Museum (now the South Australian Museum) and the Australian Museum in Sydney. In Adelaide, he was hosted by Edward Charles Stirling, then director of the Adelaide Museum. From Adelaide, Dixon sent back to his colleagues a postcard noting how productive the trip was for the Peabody Museum and its potential to acquire 'a lot of good things' (Figure 20.3). Following Dixon's Adelaide trip, Stirling sent a letter of introduction ahead of Dixon to Robert Etheridge Jr, the director of the Australian Museum in Sydney, requesting Etheridge help 'his friend' by 'show[ing] him all you can of your fine ethnological collection and help him in the understanding thereof' (Australian Museum Archives AMS 6-Letter 653-1909). Dixon visited the Australian Museum over two days – 25 and 26 August 1909 – and upon the conclusion of his visit requested 12 photographs of material culture objects from the collections, mostly ceremonial objects, from Australia, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and New Zealand.





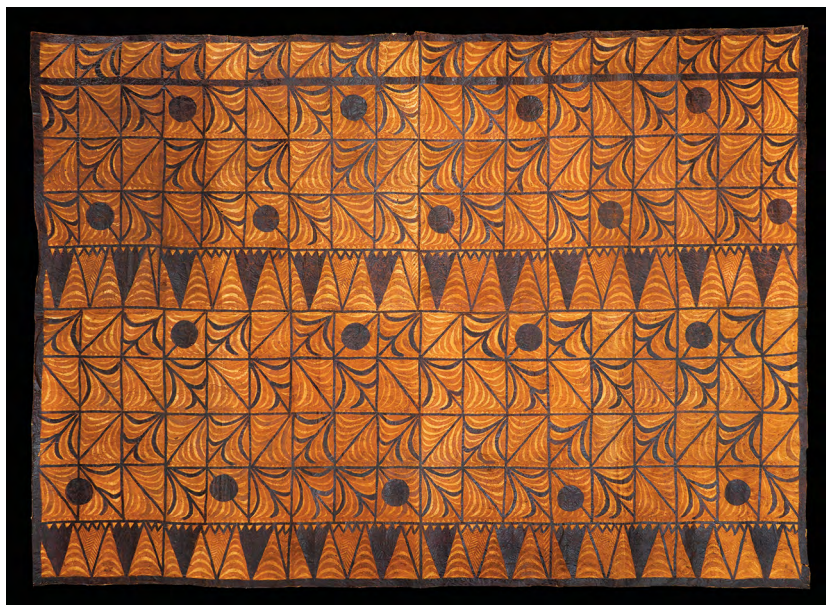
**Figure 20.3. Postcard labelled 'Native Woman South. Aust.'**

Sent by Dixon from the South Australian Museum in Adelaide to Professor Putnam at the Peabody, dated 18 August 1909.

Note: The text reads: 'Dear Profs, Already on my way home. Am finding much of great interest in the Museum. Think we can get a lot of good things in Sydney with Stirling here at Adelaide. Sincerely, R.B.D.' Museum Collection.

Source: © President and Fellows of Harvard College, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology (PM2004.29.21655).

In the course of his global travels, Dixon acquired a variety of ethnographic materials, including nearly 600 objects from Southeast Asia and a significant collection of Maidu material culture, which he systematically compiled for the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Yet from Oceania, the Peabody Museum catalogue attributes a total of only seven objects to Dixon (Accessions 9-29; 12-31; and the posthumous accession 36-45). Of these, only two are confirmed to be from Fiji: a printed *masi* (bark cloth) and a probable *gata* club. Another bark cloth (Figure 20.4) is recorded as being ‘sent to Dr. Dixon by his Fiji boy’ from Viti Levu. It was most likely purchased in Fiji, but its distinctive design suggests it is actually a *siapo* cloth made by neighbouring Samoans. Additional provenance information is unknown, and it remains unclear whether Dixon’s unnamed ‘Fiji boy’ assisted in the procurement of the rest of his small collection.



**Figure 20.4. Samoan *siapo’elei* (barkcloth decorated using the rubbing or imprinting method) ‘sent to Dr. Dixon by his Fiji boy’.**

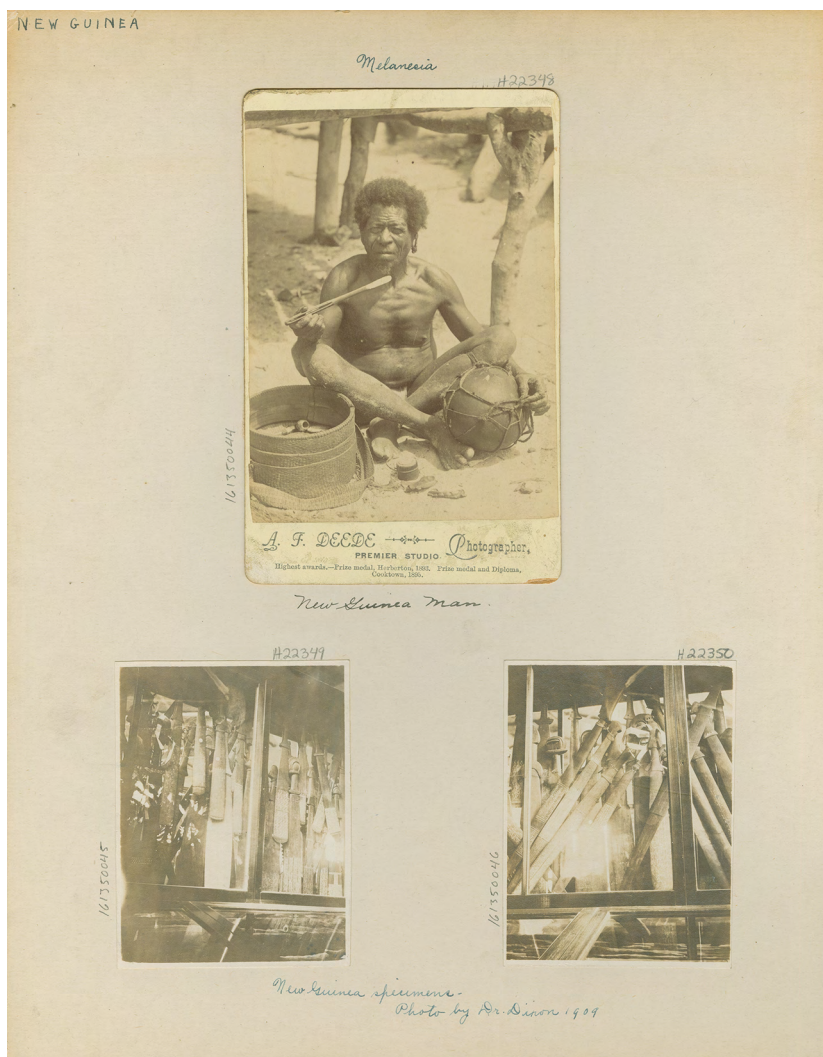
Gift of Dr R.B. Dixon, 1912.

Source: © President and Fellows of Harvard College, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology (PM12-31-70/84109).

Given Dixon's travels and position at the Peabody, it is surprising that he did not procure more ethnographic materials during his Pacific trip and also failed to negotiate object exchanges with the many museums, even though his postcard indicated the potential opportunities. It is possible that the Peabody's own extensive collection made additional acquisitions of similar provenance superfluous in the eyes of Dixon and the Peabody, while photographs could more easily be used for comparative and pedagogical purposes. What is known from Dixon's own letters to his friends (Circular Quarterly 1902–1952, Houghton Library Harvard University), numerous museums' archives and the Peabody annual reports is that Dixon took many photographs and purchased 'several hundred' photographic prints of material culture objects of 'anthropological interest' for the museum (Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology 1908–09:271). Perhaps in line with his mostly overlooked legacy and the rumoured destruction of his personal and scholarly materials after his death, an accession of Dixon's photographs (Accession 47-26) was eventually slotted for deaccessioning by the Peabody in the 1950s due to a staff member's determination that they held 'no anthropological value' (Accession 47-26). The collection went missing over the years but was rediscovered in an unlabelled box by the Peabody's Senior Archivist Katherine Satriano in 2019 during the course of research for the *Uncovering Pacific Pasts* exhibit at the Peabody Museum. Most likely incomplete, the current collection hosts a series of dated albums of negatives from Dixon's travels, including one from his time in Fiji that features an as-yet unidentified Fijian locale, his 'Fijian boy' guide and images taken aboard what is presumably the TSS *Manuka*. The collection also includes loose negatives taken of photographs appearing on the pages of German and English publications, clubs in a museum case (see Figure 20.5) and copy negatives from Alexander Agassiz's Pacific expeditions.

Several of these images reappear printed and pasted onto a large collection of what the Peabody Museum refers to as 'H-Boards' – folder-sized cardstock featuring reproductions of photographic prints visualising material culture, ordered geographically (Figure 20.5). There is little documentation about the history, use and purpose of the H-Boards, although the museum's annual reports suggest the then collection of 15,000 photographs was assembled and filed 'on cards of uniform size, classified and arranged' from 1915 onwards (Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology 1915–16:254), and it is presumed they were used for reference, research and teaching.





**Figure 20.5. One of the Peabody Museum's 'H-Boards', labelled both 'Melanesia' and 'NEW GUINEA', mounted with an 1890s postcard print of an unnamed New Guinea man, alongside two photographs Dixon took of New Guinea and Trobriand Island clubs displayed in a (presumably Australian) museum.**

Source: © President and Fellows of Harvard College, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology (PM2004.29.22348-.22350).

In 1916 Dixon published his first major work about the region, entitled *Oceanic Mythology*. His motivations for the monograph exceeded simply documenting and reporting on the types of myths widespread across the Pacific. He sought to map the diffusion of myths as evidence for migration waves of people (Dixon 1916:xiii). Dixon concluded that the distribution of myths in Oceania coincided with other forms of evidence, thus verifying multiple waves of migration by peoples in the Pacific, west to east (Dixon 1916:305–306). Dixon’s objectives and his research interest as illustrated in *Oceanic Mythology* – mapping the diffusion of anthropological evidence (in this instance myths and language) – became a recurring focus of all his subsequent major works throughout his life, including *The Racial History of Man* (1923), *The Building of Cultures* (1928) and other notable articles such as: ‘The Independence of the Culture of the American Indian’ (1912); ‘Culture Contact and Migration versus Independent Origin: A Plea for More Light’ (1918); ‘A New Theory of Polynesian Origins’ (1920); ‘The Problem of the Sweet Potato in Polynesia’ (1932); and ‘Contacts With America Across The Southern Pacific’ (1933). In these publications, Dixon focuses on mapping distribution of racial types, material culture objects and their styles, technological innovations and introduced plants, referring in all instances to data and collections amassed by others. In this way, Dixon is best understood as the quintessential armchair anthropologist, a collector and analyst of ideas. However, in tracing the dispersal of culture and people through space and time, Dixon, unlike many of his contemporaries at the time (predominantly ethnologists in the British and German traditions such as Fritz Graebner, W.H.R. Rivers and Grafton Elliot Smith), questioned the ‘Diffusionist model’ as the only mechanism to explain cultural change (Trigger 2006:228). Diffusionists such as Grafton Elliot Smith argued that the primary mechanism to explain cultural similarities between disconnected populations was through the direct transmission of ideas (Spriggs 2018; see also Spriggs, **Chapter 19**, Edmundson, **Chapter 21**, and Aigner, **Chapter 22**, all this volume). This is most poignantly illustrated in the differences in the 1911 addresses given by Dixon and Rivers to the American Association for the Advancement of Science and the British Association for the Advancement of Science, respectively. While Dixon used his speech to eloquently critique Graebner’s diffusionist argument for the spread of Melanesian bow culture in North America (Dixon 1912), Rivers was espousing ‘that I have been led quite independently to much the same general position as that of the German scholar’ (Rivers 1911:388).

In the history books, Dixon is perhaps most well known for his ill-fated 1923 publication *The Racial History of Man*. The book presents a narrative of migrations of peoples across the globe, according to racial types using a novel methodology (Tozzer and Kroeber 1936). Dixon combined three physical measurements – the length–breadth, height–length and nasal indices – at the time collected as standard measurements in somatological studies used as a tool for classifying human populations’ racial types and their associated cognitive and cultural traits. By the time of the book’s publication in 1923, Dixon’s methodology and ideas were considered grossly outdated, with renowned physical anthropologist Aleš Hrdlička labelling the work a ‘disaster’ (Hrdlička 1923:724; Sullivan 1923). Dixon was aware that it was a risky enterprise for an anthropologist, librarian and museum curator with a PhD in Native American Indian linguistics – as he never actively trained or worked as a physical anthropologist or collected his own data – to present such a work to his academic colleagues. Unsurprisingly then, *The Racial History of Man* is not fondly remembered in the annals of anthropology’s disciplinary history, with Dixon himself facetiously referring to the book as ‘my crime’ (Tozzer and Coon 1943:xi).

Dixon’s ideas of race and evolution were particularly influential on Ernest Hooton, as evidenced in the similarities between Dixon’s *The Racial History of Man* (1923) and Hooton’s *Up from the Ape* (1931) (Caspari 2003). Hooton was appointed as an instructor in anthropology and associate curator of somatology at Harvard in 1913, and went on to teach the founding generation of physical anthropologists in the US (Shapiro 1954). Such was Dixon’s influence on Hooton that it was he who commissioned Dixon’s festschrift, *Studies in the Anthropology of Oceania and Asia* (Coon et al. 1943), which contained contributions from Dixon’s students, including H.L. Shapiro, C.S. Coon, J.M. Andrews, K.P. Emory, E.S.G. Handy, W.W. Howells and D.L. Oliver, among others.

Dixon, like Hooton, was also a prolific teacher and widely acknowledged as the ‘workhorse’ of Harvard’s anthropology department in its early years, establishing and expanding the curriculum for the better part of four decades (Hinsley 1992:137–138; Hooton 1936:523–527). After Putnam’s initial direction, no one in Harvard’s anthropology department has taught, or introduced, more regular courses during their tenure. Between 1902 and 1935, Dixon taught more than 50 per cent of the courses each year and oversaw nearly half of the graduate students’ courses of research.

Dixon's specialisation on the Pacific has had long-lasting impacts for scholarship in the region; indeed, it can easily be argued that he began the Americanist anthropological research tradition in the region. His courses 'Ethnology of Polynesia and Australia' (or its iterations reflecting contemporary anthropological trends: 'Ethnology of Oceania', 'Ethnography of Oceania', 'Races and Cultures of Oceania') were taught at Harvard annually, with rare exception, long after his death in 1935. Carlton Coon, Donald Scott and J.O. Brew taught the course biannually until 1949, when another Harvard graduate, Douglas Oliver, took the reins, expanding the class catalogue on Oceanic studies dramatically. Oliver attracted a new cohort of students that would become the first postwar generation of US professionally trained anthropologists and archaeologists to work in the region, including the likes of Harry Shapiro and William W. Howells. Dixon also taught and was involved in some of the earliest archaeological investigations of Polynesia, advising on the design of the fieldwork for the pivotal Bayard Dominick Expedition of 1920 that launched the careers of Edward S.C. Handy, Ralph Linton and Kenneth P. Emory.

Roland Burrage Dixon trained the first generation of American anthropologists and archaeologists that went on to establish the now dominant Americanist academic tradition in the Pacific. He was also the first academically trained disciplinary professional to explore the Pacific from the US firsthand. Yet, to date, most disciplinary histories neglect any major contributions by him. New research exploring his influence on his peers and students, and evaluating his academic works and critiques of dominant theoretical paradigms within anthropology at the time, is now required to assess his impact and until now unknown legacy in the history of anthropology.

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