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H.D. Skinner

Moira White

Henry Devenish Skinner (1886–1978) was an enthusiastic, energetic and reputedly charming recent Cambridge graduate when he began work as assistant curator at Otago Museum, Dunedin, in 1919. He immediately embarked on the purposeful expansion of the museum's anthropological and archaeological collections, prepared for teaching duties at the University of Otago, where he established a new course in anthropology, and set in motion an ambitious research plan.

Pākehā had questioned when Māori settled Aotearoa/New Zealand, and from where, since their own, later arrival. Discussion was a matter of public interest in Skinner's childhood, and the subject of academic dialogue among scholars working in the wider Pacific throughout his career. At a time when anthropology was seen as a discipline comprising separate fields, each of which brought different types of information from its own techniques and methodologies to bear on broader issues, Skinner sought to contribute to the debate on the settlement of Polynesia through material culture studies.

To this end, he first pursued publication of his study of the material culture of the Moriori people of the Chatham Islands, situated approx. 870 km east of Christchurch, New Zealand. By his own account, his interest in this area dated from about 1906 (Skinner 1923:3). Before the outbreak of World War I he had begun an examination of museum and private collections in New Zealand, and planned a visit to the Islands. Enlistment

and engagement, however, meant a hiatus in this research. Following his discharge from the army on medical grounds in England in 1917, he resumed the work. He visited private and public British collections, read Lieutenant William Broughton's log in the British Museum, began writing a thesis and enrolled in the anthropology course at Cambridge University (Figure 23.1). On his return to New Zealand, among the demands and exciting potential of his new position, he again pursued options for visiting the Islands.

No. 224001

POLICE CERTIFICATE OF IDENTITY.
(See instructions overleaf.)

SURNAME (in block letters) SKINNER

Christian Names Henry Devenish

Age 30 Height 5 ft 6 in Profession or Occupation Student

Permanent Address { 35 Rusell Road
Cambridge

DECLARATION.—I declare that the above particulars are true.
Signature of person named above { H. D. Skinner

CERTIFICATE A.—I certify that the above description and photograph is that of Mr. H. D. Skinner

Signature of Police or responsible householder { Alfred C. Haddon

Address 3, Cranmer Rd., Cambridge Date Aug. 18, 1918

CERTIFICATE B.—I certify that Mr. H. D. Skinner who has signed the above Certificate A is a responsible householder in this district.

Signature of Police Alfred C. Haddon Date 18 Aug 1918

Police Station Cambridge Borough

PHOTOGRAPH.

PERMIT.
(For conditions see back.)

PERMIT TO IRELAND
21 AUG 1918
VALID FOR 3 MONTHS

Figure 23.1. H.D. Skinner's English Police Certificate of Identity, 1918; his description and photograph certified by A.C. Haddon.

Source: With the permission of H.D. Skinner's family.

Adzes

At a Science Congress meeting in Christchurch, Skinner told listeners that ‘the special interest of Moriori material culture lay in the light it threw on the history of Maori material culture and art’ (Anon 1919). Later that year he wrote to geologist Herbert Gregory at Yale University, director of the Bishop Museum in Hawai‘i from 1919 to 1936, that he had ‘an exhaustive work’ (Otago Museum Archive (OM), Skinner to Gregory, 13 September 1919) on Moriori material culture almost ready for publication. He added:

Our principal problem is the determination of what elements may be regarded as essentially Polynesian, and which as borrowings. It can be attacked only after an intensive study of the material culture of each island group in Polynesia and its borders. (OM Archive, Skinner to Gregory, 13 September 1919)

Anthropologist Alfred Cort Haddon (see also Herle and Wright, **Chapter 12**, this volume) had encouraged Skinner’s taxonomic studies at Cambridge (Gathercole 1979:108) and they were foundational to this work. Begun during his time at Cambridge, it took form four years later as *The Morioris of Chatham Islands*. In it, Skinner described various aspects of Moriori material culture, including a proposed classification of stone tool types. He believed indicating ‘comparative examples’ (Skinner 1923:5) would help to ‘determine the closeness of the relationship between the material culture of the Morioris and that of other parts of Polynesia’ (Skinner 1923:5).

‘In the section which deals with axes, adzes, and chisels’, he wrote:

what is believed to be a new method has been followed. The implements have been classified into groups or types, and it happens that no type has been erected that does not also exist in some other part of the Pacific. For each type a ‘type specimen’ has been named, and wherever possible its front, side, and back views have been given, as well as the cross section [...] It is believed that by this method students will be able to obtain a much more accurate knowledge of the form and relative size of these implements. (Skinner 1923:5)

All were figured at a uniform scale. He continued:

The types that have been erected correspond to fairly well-marked groups of adzes, the shape and size of each group being determined no doubt by the use to which it was put. As to what that use was for each particular implement we can only conjecture. (Skinner 1923:89)

His confidence in the reality of his results is evident in the conclusion of a 1920 offer to a colleague: 'If you will send me photos of the Maori adzes that you have I may be able to send you examples of missing types' (OM Archive, Skinner to Stokes, 12 July 1920).

Gregory facilitated publication of the manuscript in the Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum Memoir series. When Skinner wrote to say he had mailed the three parcels containing its maps, text and illustrations to Hawai'i, he added:

At one stage of the research I thought that I should be content with a purely descriptive memoir, but I decided to demonstrate the solution of the problem of origins, and I think you will agree that it adds greatly to the interest, and perhaps I may say the importance of the memoir. (OM Archive, Skinner to Gregory, 16 September 1921)

He finished:

It is with a feeling of great relief that I realise the completion of my first work of any size. I am deeply grateful to you for your encouragement and for undertaking its publication. (OM Archive, Skinner to Gregory, 16 September 1921)

One senses an exhilaration when he speaks of his hopes for the potential of this methodology.

The review of this volume by anthropologist Te Rangi Hīroa (Peter Buck) showed his agreement with Skinner when he wrote that:

the most outstanding section that shows much original work is that dealing with adzes [...] The descriptions and figures of the types will enable students of Pacific regions to make comparisons with other areas by a common method. (Buck 1924:67–68)

Similarly, ethnologist Edward Smith Craighill Handy's review commented:

The section devoted to adzes is the most important in this study. It will be of interest to all students of material culture, as well as to Polynesian ethnographers, for it is a distinct contribution in the line of establishing a method of comparing adze forms. (Handy 1925:334)

Noting also anthropologist Ralph Linton's descriptions of Marquesan adzes, Handy said that both men had 'demonstrated that Polynesian adzes [...] fall into definite classes; and that the distribution of types [...] is significant ethnographically' (Handy 1925:334).



Louis Sullivan wrote directly from the American Museum of Natural History to tell Skinner:

how much I enjoyed your splendid paper on 'The Morioris of Chatham Islands'. It fits in very well with physical findings [...] I believe the prospects for a partial solution of the Polynesian problems are brighter than they have been for some time. (Sullivan to Skinner, 18 December 1923) (Figure 23.2)¹

Figure 23.2. The Percy Smith Prize medal awarded for research in Anthropology to H.D. Skinner in 1926.

Source: With the permission of H.D. Skinner's family.

¹ The original of this letter has not been located in the Otago Museum archives.

Later, anthropologist J.D. Freeman said this memoir was:

a landmark in the history of Polynesian ethnology. It was the first systematic account of the material culture of a Polynesian people, and set new standards in description, classification and analysis. (Freeman 1959:16)

About 70 years after its publication, historian Michael King wrote that Skinner's 'analysis of material culture, particularly artefacts [...] showed beyond doubt that the Moriori were Polynesian, that the special features of their culture had evolved on the Chathams, and that their probable place of origin immediately prior to the Chathams was New Zealand'. Sounding perplexed, he added that nevertheless Skinner's 'measured and scholarly findings failed to penetrate the public consciousness' (King 1993).

Today, the Deed of Settlement² between Crown and Moriori acknowledges:

Moriōri karāpuna (ancestors) were the waina-pono (original inhabitants) of Rēkohu, Rangihau, Hokoreoro (South East Island), and other nearby islands (making up the Chatham Islands). They arrived sometime between 1000 and 1400 CE and all Moriōri hokopapa to (are descended from) the founding ancestor Rongomaiwhenua. (New Zealand Government 2019)

The next step

After the memoir, Skinner expanded the geographical area of his interest. 'In matters of science', he had written to Haddon:

we are rapidly being pulled within the American orbit. – I have just finished my Moriōri MS which has been altered, enlarged, and entirely re-written, and in a week or two will dispatch it to Honolulu [...] Now that the Moriōri material is off my hands

2 A Deed of Settlement documents the kinds of redress negotiated in a historical Treaty of Waitangi settlement. The Treaty of Waitangi was signed by Māori *rangatira* (chiefs) and representatives of the British Crown in 1840. It enabled Māori to keep *rangatiratanga* (chieftainship) over their resources and guaranteed Māori the rights and privileges of British citizens. Historical claims are made by Māori against the Crown (now the government of New Zealand) for breaches of the Treaty before 1992. Historical settlements aim to resolve these claims and provide some redress to claimant groups in the form of a Crown acknowledgement and apology, cultural redress, and/or commercial and financial redress (New Zealand Government 2021).

I hope to begin on Maori culture, working it in areas as outlined in my paper in this month's J.P.S. (OM Archive, Skinner to Haddon, 23 June 1921)

In the paper to which he referred (Skinner 1921), he outlined a number of culture areas for New Zealand, each described by a set of material culture and other attributes.

Skinner also continued thinking about adzes. In 1928 he republished line drawings of his types with amended descriptions, stating his belief that they were 'established as objective realities' (Skinner and Bauke 1928:10). While in 1923, Skinner had suggested a minor revision of the terms used to describe adzes in ethnographer Elsdon Best's monograph (Best 1912), seven years later he and three colleagues went further, publishing 'Terminology for Ground Stone Cutting-Implements in Polynesia' (Buck et al. 1930). That paper asserted 'the need for precise definitions of forms and of processes of manufacture'. The authors argued that the variation in terms they and others had used in previous publications made 'comparison uncertain' and allowed 'inadequate provision for precise technical definition of the remarkable assemblage of ground stone cutting-tools from Polynesia as a whole' (Buck et al. 1930:174).

The interest in culture-historical analyses was widespread among scholars who sought to understand the distribution of adzes in Oceania before the development of dating techniques that would allow more precise chronological control. In 1935, a report from the Science Congress of the Royal Society of New Zealand, held in Dunedin, said:

Mr H.D. Skinner gave a very clear classification of adzes from Murihiku, illustrated by the Museum case displays. Seven distinct types were shown to have existed, and that some such classification could be made for the Chatham Islands and the Cook Islands was proved by an examination of the cases. (Anon. 1935)

In 1938, Skinner presented his study of Māori adzes at the Third Congress of Prehistorians of the Far East in Singapore.³ It was published in the proceedings (Skinner 1938). He gave two reasons for the focus on Murihiku, a name he used to designate 'the districts of Westland, South Canterbury, Otago Southland, and Stewart Island' (Skinner 1938:142).

3 This was only the third meeting held before World War II; the fourth and final was held in 1953, in Manila, with the Eighth Pacific Science Congress.

The first was that the area ‘produced ground stone cutting implements in greater variety and in greater beauty than any other region in Polynesia, or perhaps in the whole world’ (Skinner 1938:142). The second was practical and twofold. On the one hand, it related to the volume of *taoka* (treasured possessions) available for detailed study in Otago Museum (notwithstanding his extensive knowledge of material in other collections around the world), some of which ‘had been recovered from stratified sites, data not yet secured in any other part of Polynesia’ (Skinner 1938:142). On the other, it referred to the opportunity to collaborate with artist Lily Daff, assistant in charge of installation and exhibition at the museum, in the drawings of the type specimens (Figure 23.3).



Figure 23.3. Duncan Macdonald presented this black basalt *tuki*, found in 1873 at Lovell’s Flat, Otago, to Otago Museum.

H.D. Skinner chose it to illustrate the type specimen of a 1C in his classification. He added that it was ‘a beautiful adze’.

Source: Otago Museum Collection (D23.682) with kind permission of Te Rūnanga o Ōtākou, and the Otago Museum Māori Advisory Committee.

The bound copy of the reprint Skinner presented to Otago Museum has the words ‘axes, chisels and gouges’ scored for removal on the title page. There is also an appealing handwritten note in the upper right corner: ‘This article is part of a larger memoir, and incidentally shows evidence of its origin. H.D.S.’

In 1938 Skinner concluded:

The classification here proposed is designed to apply ultimately to the adzes of Polynesia as a whole. It has been applied to very large New Zealand collections, to a large collection from the Chatham islands, to a large Cook islands collection, and to smaller collections from Rapa, the Society islands, and the Marquesas. In all these cases it can be applied with ease. (Skinner 1938:171)

However, in the same paragraph he anticipated that additional varieties would be required for a Polynesian typology. Half a decade later he published 'The Classification of Greywacke and Nephrite Adzes from Murihiku, N.Z.' (Skinner 1943), acknowledging the impact that material and manufacturing techniques might have on form.

In 1940 ethnologist Roger Duff, who had studied under Skinner at the University of Otago (see also Brooks, **Chapter 9**, this volume), published 'A Cache of Adzes from Motukarara' (Duff 1940). He suggested reducing Skinner's 10 types to four, each with a number of varieties. The year 1945 saw what Duff described as 'a suggested revision of the standard typology of the adzes of New Zealand, as published by Skinner (1938 and 1943)' (Duff 1945:147). Thereafter this became the accepted reference. Other typologies have since been proposed, and studies of adze typologies undertaken (e.g. Best 1977; Cleghorn 1984; Park 1972). It would seem that, for many later scholars, as well as for Skinner, documenting the diversity of stone adzes in the Pacific Islands has appeared 'critical to understanding the relationship between past human populations' (Shipton et al. 2016:361).

Summary

H.D. Skinner returned to Aotearoa/New Zealand from Cambridge near the end of the second decade of the twentieth century, and near the beginning of archaeology and professional anthropology in the Pacific. He worked at Otago Museum for nearly 40 years, becoming director in 1937, a role he held until the late 1950s.

Skinner's fascination with form and material culture remained with him throughout that time. He valued precision in thought and observation. Although not primarily an archaeologist, he understood it to be an essential part of anthropology (Figure 23.4). His association with self-taught archaeologist David Teviotdale has been argued to mark the beginning of archaeology as a scientific discipline in New Zealand (Freeman 1959:22). He was the founding chair of the New Zealand Archaeological Association.



Figure 23.4. H.D. Skinner (left, foreground, with rucksack) at an Otago beach archaeological site.

Source: Otago Museum archives.

Skinner's adze classification may have been replaced by others, but it was a significant milestone in Pacific material culture dialogue. Through it and his delineation of culture areas in New Zealand, as well as a long series of publications, museum displays structured on morphological and typological connections and groupings, lectures and less formal interactions, Skinner sought to offer a methodological framework for facilitating discussion and comparison.

Two significant publications organised by Skinner's associates remain widely used. A collection of anthropological essays written by former students and colleagues (Freeman and Geddes 1959) was both a personal and a professional tribute (Figure 23.5). Later, the wonderfully titled *Comparatively Speaking* (Skinner 1974), 'one man's approach to the study of Oceanic culture history' as the paper cover described it, appeared after his retirement. In it, some of his earlier papers were republished, including the 1938 'Maori Adzes from the Murihiku Region', besides five new papers, some of which were co-authored.

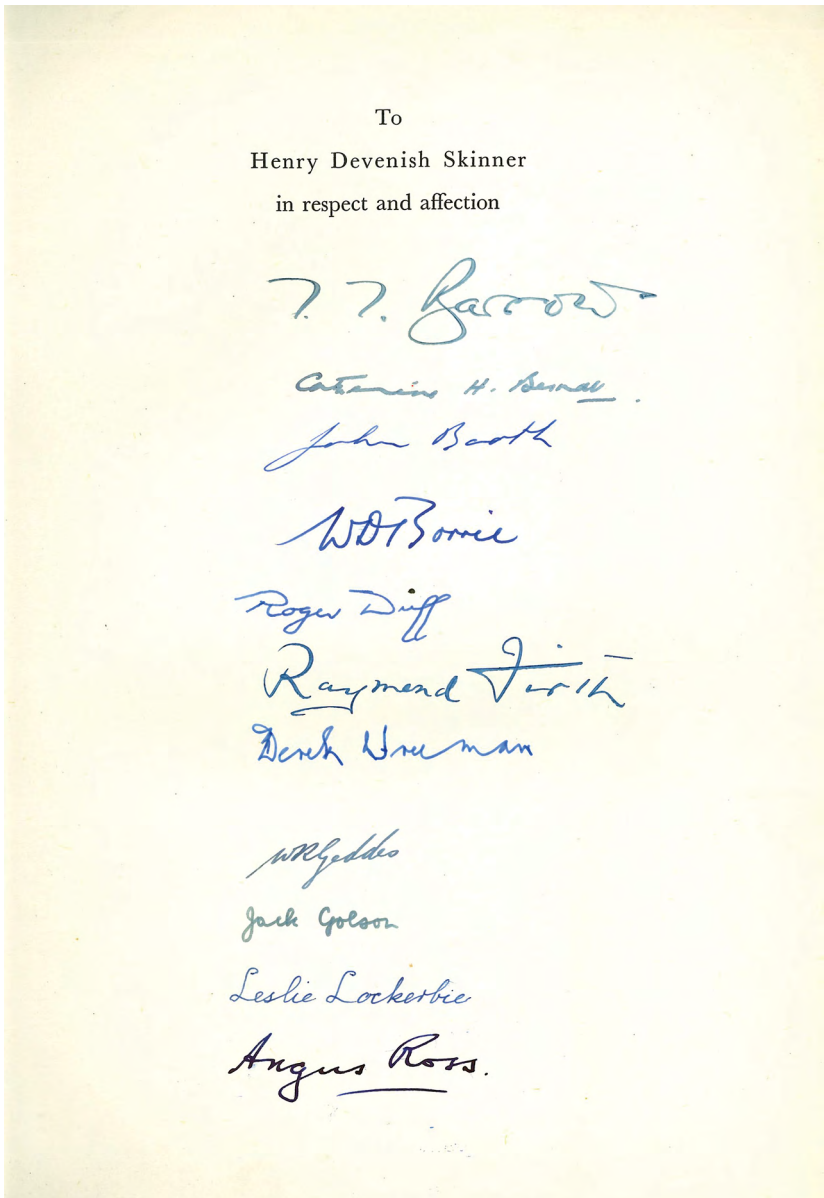


Figure 23.5. The dedication page of H.D. Skinner's personal copy of *Anthropology in the South Seas* was signed by the contributing authors.

Source: Otago Museum Library.

In 1923 Skinner described his Type I adze as ‘more thoroughly characteristic of Polynesia as a whole than is any other class of objects’ (Skinner 1923:92). How fitting, then, that in 1959 J.D. Freeman should have imagined that if a portrait were to be painted of H.D. Skinner holding an object that symbolised his professional career, that *taoka* would be a tanged adze from Murihiku.

Objects highlighted in this chapter were on display at Otago Museum from February to July 2020.

Acknowledgements

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