

Grafton Elliot Smith, Egyptology and the Diffusion of Culture

Preface

Grafton Elliot Smith (1871-1937) is a great forgotten Australian. He was one of the world's pioneering anatomists, an authority on human evolution, and a renowned, if controversial, amateur archaeologist/anthropologist. He wrote numerous scholarly and popular works, founded a leading edge medical and social science school at University College of the University of London, and was made a fellow of the Royal Society and a knight of the realm. Yet today his name is virtually unknown in the land of his birth, partly no doubt because he lived most of his life in Britain – although he traveled widely and often revisited his homeland, not least significantly when he was hugely instrumental in setting up anthropology as an academic discipline in Australia.

Elliot Smith is worth remembering, and I hope that this little book will help in that respect. It is not a biography as such, but rather a history of the man and his ideas put in the context of his life and times, with the major focus on his much contested theory of the diffusion of culture, which put Egypt as the fountain-head of human civilization, the centre from which major elements of civilization were spread by the migration of peoples and ideas. I want to revisit his writings, robust and challenging, but always scientific in their methodology ; to see them in the light of contemporary events – such as the exciting archaeological discoveries of the early twentieth century and the catastrophic First World War – and to look at the way people reacted to his theories. I do not wish to put forward any hagiographical or total defence of his position; but at the same time I believe that some redressing of the intellectual balance is required. His diffusionist model may not have become – as it at one stage seemed to promise to become – the ruling paradigm in anthropology, but nor has it been conclusively refuted, despite being much ridiculed in some academic circles. Elliot Smith didn't win his debate – although he contended to the end against such heavyweights as Bronislaw Malinowski that it was winnable. Rather than being refuted by systematic research, it is contendable that the discourses of anthropology and archaeology simply moved on to other issues and embraced other methodologies. Many central ideas raised by Elliot Smith and co-diffusionists such as W. J. Perry were essentially side-stepped and never really subjected to sustained scrutiny. Elliot Smith would have been the first to welcome such scrutiny. Scientific progress, he always said, was a matter of offering hypotheses and testing them rigorously, and he always professed himself more than willing to accept conclusions that contradicted his own suggestions. My overall message is that Elliot Smith's prodigious labours and fertile ideas – so long unfairly caricatured and stereotyped in the ethnological literature – deserve considered reassessment.

Whilst I was researching Elliot Smith's life it was brought home forcefully to me many times that the people I was dealing with – colourful figures such as W. H. R. Rivers, Will Perry, Bronislaw Malinowski, John Linton Myres and others – were not reasoning machines or purely cerebral creatures, but were living, breathing humans with the emotions, feelings and agendas of the human condition, products of their time and cultures. Certainly this was true of Elliot Smith. He varied from being kind, charming and

urbane to being cantankerous and combative (especially in print). He may even have been a trifle autistic, given his capacity for fierce concentration and indifference to personal circumstances. For example, he was oblivious to the flies and heat of the Egyptian desert when he was examining thousands of mummies that were being uncovered in the famous excavations of the 1900s. As for being a product of his culture, the fact that he was a colonial Australian may not have been entirely irrelevant to the fact that he was inclined to rebelliousness against scientific orthodoxies and often lacking in the usual respect given to ranking thinkers. The irony of it all was that he himself was to become a mandarin in the very scientific establishment that he appeared to disdain.

I am an historian and do not attempt in this book to make technical judgments on the archaeological and anthropological issues at stake. However I would like to acknowledge the welcome advice given by my archaeologist wife Ann, whose loving support and encouragement sustained me throughout this project. Other archaeological friends also kindly offered help and guidance. Most of them were totally unaware of Elliot Smith's writings, which had disappeared from academic reading lists after the Malinowskian revolution. I am deeply thankful also to Margaret Higgs who over many years has provided me with invaluable research assistance and editorial advice. I owe a debt also to the libraries and institutions that hold materials relevant to Elliot Smith. Holdings of his papers are listed in the Select Bibliography. Many thanks to the staff of the Inter-Library Loan section of the University of Queensland Library for obtaining masses of material for me, much of it rare and difficult to access.