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978-0-521-10386-2 - Cambridge and the Torres Strait: Centenary Essays on the 1898 Anthropological Expedition

Edited by Anita Herle and Sandra Rouse

Excerpt

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Introduction: Cambridge and the Torres Strait 1

Anita Herle and Sandra Rouse

On the eve of the 1898 Expedition to the Torres Strait, British anthropology was in search of self-definition. Situated precariously between the arts and the natural sciences, it was struggling for legitimacy in the academy while lacking both recognisable boundaries and a unifying paradigm. In the 1990s, after a century of practice and professionalism, anthropology again finds itself in a state of intellectual and disciplinary self-doubt. The centenary of the Expedition seems then an apt occasion for a re-examination of its place in disciplinary history. Recontextualising a moment when concepts, methodologies and practices which now seem self-evident were actively being constructed allows us a privileged view into past debates which seem no less relevant today than in 1898.

In March of that year a team of scientists sponsored by the University of Cambridge set out for the Torres Strait with the goal of an unprecedentedly comprehensive anthropological study. Led by a distinguished natural scientist and ethnologist, Alfred Cort Haddon, the Expedition included scholars in the fields of psychology, medicine and linguistics (Frontispiece). W. H. R. Rivers, originally trained as a physician, specialised in experimental psychology and physiology; he had been lecturing on the physiology of the sense organs at Cambridge since 1893. William McDougall and Charles Myers, both former students of Haddon and Rivers, were physicians. McDougall was based at St Thomas's Hospital in London, and Myers had just completed his medical studies at Cambridge. Charles Seligman¹ was house physician and a specialist in tropical diseases at St Thomas's Hospital. Sidney Ray, the Expedition's linguist, was an elementary school teacher in east London noted for his self-taught expertise on Oceanic languages. Anthony Wilkin, a student of Haddon who had done archaeological work in Egypt, was taken on as Expedition photographer.

Under its official title, 'The Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to Torres Straits',² Haddon designed the Expedition as a multidisciplinary project en-

¹ At the time of the Expedition his name was spelt Seligman[n], but he subsequently changed the spelling to Seligman.

² At the time of the Expedition the Torres Straits was spelt in the plural. This volume uses the current singular spelling of Torres Strait.

Figure 1.1 Itinerary of the Expedition members April–November 1898. This overview includes only their main movements and not the numerous side-trips in the region.

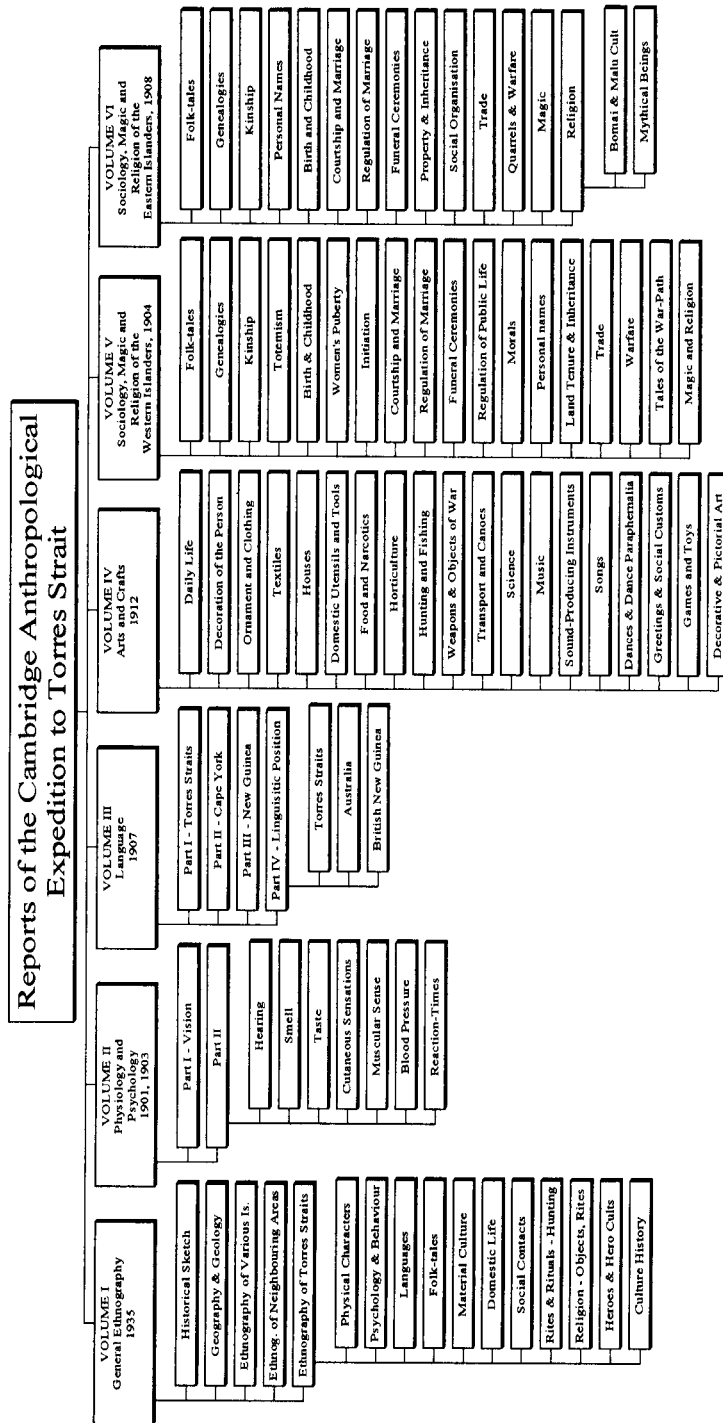
Expedition members	April	May	June	July	August	September	October	November
A. C. Haddon	Arrived Thursday Is. 22 Apr.	Mer 6–22 May; left for British New Guinea (BNG) 23 May	British New Guinea – Rigo, Central, Mekeo Districts	Returned to Mer 20 July	Mer	Kiwai Is. 11 Sept; Mabuiaug Is. 17 Sept.	Left for Saibai Is. 19 Oct; Thursday Is. via Yam & Nagir, 26 Oct.	Cape York 2 Nov.; arrived Thursday Is. 3 Nov.; left for Borneo 15 Nov.
W. McDougall	Arrived Thursday Is. 22 Apr.	Arrived Mer 6 May	Mer	Mer	Mer; left for Borneo 24 Aug.	Borneo with Myers	Borneo	Borneo
C. S. Myers	Arrived Thursday Is. 22 Apr.	Arrived Mer 6 May	Mer	Mer	Mer; left for Borneo 24 Aug.	Borneo with McDougall	Borneo	Borneo
S. H. Ray	Arrived Thursday Is. 22 Apr.	Arrived Mer 6 May; BNG with Haddon 23 May	British New Guinea	Returned to Mer 20 July	Mer	Kiwai Is. 11 Sept.; stayed on with Chalmers after ACH left for Mabuiaug	Mabuiaug 3 Oct.; Saibai 22 Oct.; Thursday Is. 3 Nov.; left for Borneo 15 Nov.	Cape York 2 Nov.; Thursday Is. 3 Nov.; left for Borneo 15 Nov.
W. H. R. Rivers	Arrived Thursday Is. 22 Apr.	Arrived Mer 6 May	Mer	Mer	Mer	Kiwai 11 Sept.; Mabuiaug 17 Sept.	Left for England 19 Oct with Wilkin	England
C. Seligman	Arrived Torres Strait from Australia c. 8 Apr.	Arrived Mer 6 May; BNG with Haddon 23 May	British New Guinea	British New Guinea	British New Guinea	Kiwai after 11 Sept.; Mabuiaug 17 Sept.	Saibai 22 Oct.; Thursday Is. via Yam, Nagir 26 Oct.	Cape York 2 Nov.; Thursday Is. 3 Nov.; left for Borneo 15 Nov.
A. Wilkin	Arrived Thursday Is. 22 Apr.	Arrived Mer 6 May; BNG with Haddon 23 May	British New Guinea	Returned to Mer 20 July	Mer	Kiwai 11 Sept.; Mabuiaug 17 Sept.	Left for England 19 Oct. with Rivers	England

compassing anthropology in its broadest sense, including ethnology, physical anthropology, psychology, linguistics, sociology, ethnomusicology and anthropogeography. Haddon was particularly insistent on including psychological research and it was indicative of his vision that he chose the new experimental psychology. Haddon's interest in anthropology had blossomed following an earlier field trip to the Torres Strait in 1888 to study marine biology. His shift from zoology to anthropology was driven by a sense of urgency; ethnographic information must be collected before 'it was too late'. On his return from the first expedition he contracted with Cambridge University Press to publish a book on the ethnography of Torres Strait but, frustrated by the gaps in his material and the difficulties of obtaining further reliable data, he eventually determined to return to the area.

The 1898 Expedition spent approximately seven months in the Torres Strait from April to October. Although most of the research was based on the islands of Mer³ and Mabuiag, there was a great deal of movement (Fig. 1.1). Research tasks were divided according to interest and expertise. Haddon took physical measurements of Islanders, recorded local customs and studied decorative art. Rivers, in charge of experimental psychology, focused on vision, and, once in the field, developed a method of recording local genealogies. McDougall studied tactile sensation while Myers, a skilful musician, concentrated on hearing and music. Ray worked on linguistics, compiling word lists, constructing grammars and assisting with translation. While Seligman's main task was to research native medicine and local pathology, he also spent considerable time in Cape York and Southern Papua, where he compiled comparative ethnographic data. The youngest member of the group, Wilkin, was the official photographer, working under Haddon's direction. Wilkin also investigated house construction and land tenure.

Influenced by Haddon's passion for detailed and accurate recording, the Expedition generated an enormous corpus of information. The official results were compiled in the six volumes of the *Reports of the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to the Torres Straits* (hereafter *Reports*) (Fig. 1.2). The *Reports* volume II, *Physiology and Psychology*, was the first to be published (in two parts, 1901 and 1903); volume I, *General Ethnography*, the last to be published, did not appear until 1935. The Expedition's research was also disseminated in numerous academic papers, reports to scientific societies, journals and newspaper articles, public lectures and museum exhibitions. A popular account of the Expedition published by Haddon shortly after returning to England, *Head-Hunters: Black, White and Brown*, provides insight into the way that some of the information in the *Reports* was generated. The visual materials include a large,

³ Mer is the local term for Murray Island (see Map 1.1).



¹ Compiled from A. Haddon (ed.), *Reports of the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to Torres Straits, Vols. I-VI* (Cambridge, 1935, 1901-03, 1907, 1912, 1904, 1908).

Figure 1.2 Content summary of the Reports of the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to the Torres Strait.

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comprehensive collection of artefacts,⁴ several hundred field photographs,⁵ a short ethnographic film sequence,⁶ and numerous drawings and sketches (Fig. 1.3). There are also sound recordings on wax cylinders.⁷ In addition to the published texts, there is a voluminous body of associated archival material containing notes, diaries, journals, sketches, maps, correspondence and other data.⁸ The contributors to this volume have drawn on these multiple sources to broaden our understanding of the interests and practices of the Expedition members and of the relationships which developed in the field. Unpublished material, in particular journals and correspondence, also provides access to the views and experiences of individual participants.⁹

The eight interdisciplinary chapters in this centenary volume cannot entirely cover the comprehensive research mandate of the Expedition. The significance of the Expedition and the subsequent careers of individual members for the professionalisation of anthropology and psychology have been acknowledged in disciplinary histories.¹⁰ Expanding on the theoretical, methodological and disciplinary contributions of the Expedition members, the contributors to this volume provide new ways of looking at and situating the Expedition's work in historical and intellectual debates. In a sense, some of the contributions can be read as an ethnography of the Expedition itself.

The chapters are grouped in pairs of related themes. Chapters 2 and 3 examine the ethnographic and institutional background of the Expedition, reviewing its contribution to the construction of anthropology as a field science and as an academic discipline. Beckett probes Haddon's efforts to position the

⁴ See David Moore, *The Torres Strait Collections of A. C. Haddon* (London, 1984). Most of the objects collected in 1898 are now in the Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (CUMAA).

⁵ The photographs are in the collections of CUMAA, as are many of the lantern slides which were subsequently made from the photographs. Copies of most of these images are also in the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) in Canberra.

⁶ Now in the National Film Archives, UK and AIATSIS.

⁷ Now in the National Sound Archives, UK and Australia.

⁸ These are deposited in the Haddon Papers in the Cambridge University Library. The Haddon Papers also incorporate a collection of Rivers's papers. Myers's expedition journal is held in the manuscript collections (separate from the Haddon Papers) of the Cambridge University Library. Much of the archival material was reproduced by the Australian Joint Copying Project in 1991 and microfilm copies are held at the the National Library of Australia and the Australian National University, Canberra.

⁹ See J. Goody, *The Expansive Moment: The Rise of Social Anthropology in Britain and Africa 1918–1970* (Cambridge, 1995) for an account which attempts to balance the actor's and observer's points of view and highlights the differentiated positions of a small group of colleagues.

¹⁰ V. Ebin and D. Swallow, 'The Proper Study of Mankind' (Cambridge, 1984); P. Gathercole, 'Cambridge and the Torres Strait 1888–1920', *Cambridge Anthropology* 3(3) (1977), 22–31; P. Jorion, 'Anthropological fieldwork: forerunners and inventors', *Cambridge Anthropology* 2 (1976), 22–5; H. Kuklick, *The Savage Within: The Social History of British Social Anthropology 1885–1945* (Cambridge, 1991); I. Langham, *The Building of British Social Anthropology: W. H. R. Rivers and His Cambridge Disciples in the Development of Kinship Studies 1898–1931* (Dordrecht, 1981); P. Sillitoe, 'To Mer, Mabuig, Muralug and Moresby: the Torres Strait Expedition', *Cambridge Anthropology* 3(2) (1976), 1–21; G. Stocking, *Ethnographer's Magic* (Wisconsin, 1983), 12–59; Stocking, *After Tylor: British Social Anthropology 1888–1951* (London, 1996), 98–123; J. Urry, *Before Social Anthropology: Essays on the History of British Anthropology* (Chur, 1993).

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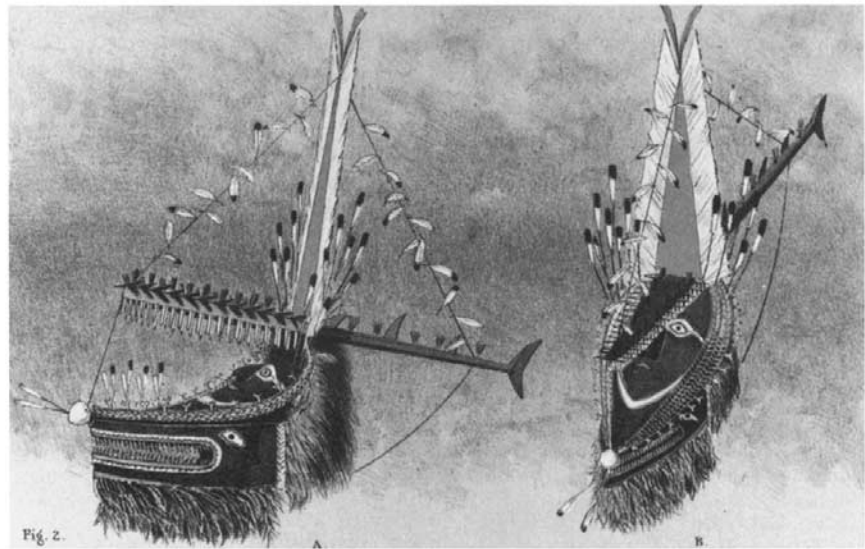
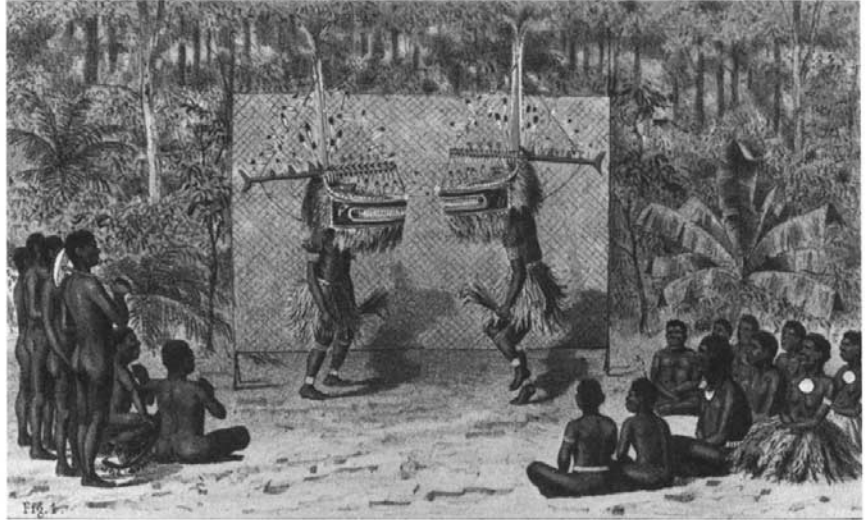
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Figure 1.3 Top: Coloured drawing by Haddon of the saw-fish dance on Thursday Island based on a photograph he took in 1888. Below: Detailed drawing of two views of the saw-fish masks based on sketches Haddon made in the field in 1888.



emerging discipline of field-based anthropology while Rouse discusses the personal and collective relationships crucial to the institutionalisation of what would eventually become social anthropology at the University of Cambridge and beyond. Chapters 4 and 5 focus on the Expedition's visual legacy and issues of representation. Herle examines Haddon's passion for collecting and discusses his influence on museological developments in Britain. Concerned with notions of re-enactment, replication and the 'salvage' paradigm, Edwards analyses how photography was developed as a means of scholarly recording and reporting. The psychological work of the Expedition is discussed by Richards

and Kuklick. Richards untangles the influence of Rivers, Myers and McDougall on the development of psychology with particular reference to changing and conflicting views regarding 'race differences'. Kuklick traces the concept of the lone field-worker to Rivers's model of self-experiment and the energetics of late Victorian evolutionist physiology. The last two chapters situate some of the Expedition's work in Torres Strait and New Guinea within current ethnological concerns. Shnukal outlines the importance of Ray's work to Pacific linguistics which has been rarely acknowledged outside that field. Urry contextualises the work of Haddon, Ray, Rivers and, particularly, Seligman, within what he terms the 'Oceanic' phase of British anthropology.

The Expedition's place in a critical period of disciplinary development and its immense associated documentation constitute a remarkably rich resource for the articulation of several critical themes by the contributors to this volume. These themes are developed in the context of multilateral relationships between the Expedition members and various academic, medical and scientific communities in Europe and between the Expedition and colonial officials, missionaries, traders, and the Torres Strait Islanders in the field. A central concern of the contributors is the methodological innovations associated with the Expedition and the transfer of skills developed in natural sciences and laboratory practice to the anthropological field. On another level, the data produced by the Expedition can be used as a source for analysing how information was gathered and the social and technical systems involved in its production. Reflections on the Expedition thus provide the opportunity for deepening our understanding of the dynamic interaction of individuals and embryonic disciplines a century ago. Today, the results of the Expedition also have a contemporary relevance for anthropology and for the Torres Strait Islanders.

The setting

The Torres Strait, named after the Spanish explorer Captain Luis Baéz de Torres in 1606, is located between Northern Australia and Papua New Guinea (Map 1.1). While the Torres Strait Islands may have seemed remote to Europeans, they were at the centre of complex local and international networks. From the second half of the eighteenth century, the Strait became an increasingly important passage between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific. By the 1870s the region was a culturally hybrid area with an influx of divers and traders – Malay, Japanese, South Sea Islanders, Europeans – fuelled by lucrative international markets in pearl shell and *bêche-de-mer*. However, the influence of outsiders on specific islands was variable and changed over time. Other crucial influences on the Islanders were the increasing role of the Queensland government, which took control of the Torres Strait in 1879, and the arrival of the London Missionary Society in 1871, now incorporated into Islanders' knowledge of their history

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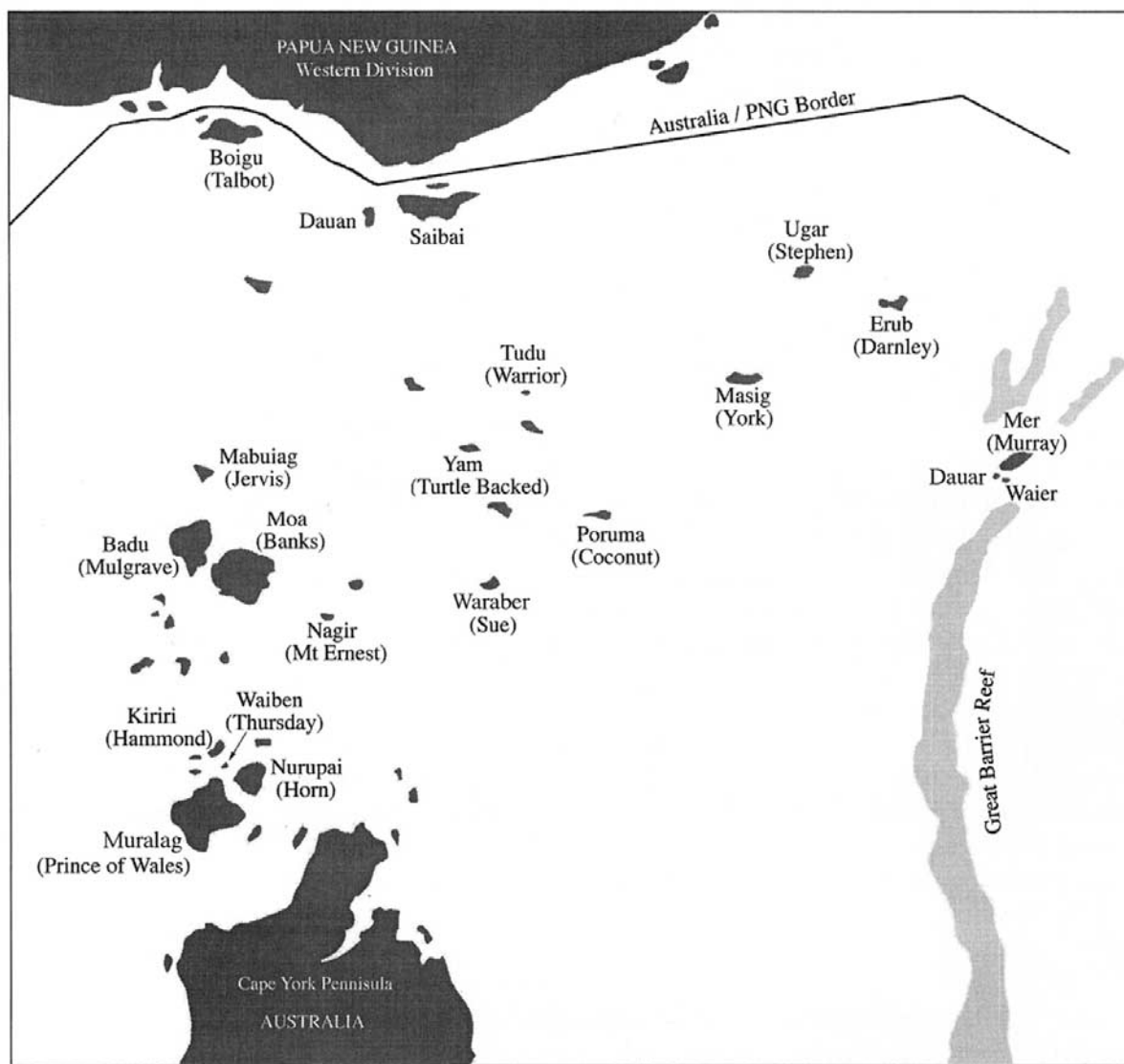
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Map 1.1 Torres Strait, showing the main islands. The European names are in brackets. Today the Islanders use a combination of indigenous and European names.

as 'the coming of the light' (Fig. 1.4).¹¹ Haddon, well aware of these influences on 'traditional' Island custom, used the changes in the region to justify the importance of 'salvage' ethnography, in a milieu he saw as in imminent danger of disappearance. Yet, as Beckett shows, there was a misfit between Haddon's conventional obituary for Torres Strait culture, surviving only in the memories of the old men, and his lively vignettes of everyday life.

While most of the chapters in this volume focus on the Expedition's work in

¹¹ For detailed overview of the colonial history of the Torres Strait and the Islanders' varied responses to the impact of outsiders see Jeremy Beckett, *Torres Strait Islanders: Custom and Colonialism* (Cambridge, 1987).

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the Torres Strait Islands, Haddon, Ray, Seligman and Wilkin also conducted comparative work along the coast of New Guinea. At the invitation of Charles Hose, Government Resident of the Baram District of Sarawak, the Expedition was extended, with Haddon, McDougall, Myers, Ray and Seligman spending several months in Sarawak on the way back to England. Within the Torres Strait the research conducted on the islands of Mer and Mabuiag was by far the most intensive and it is here that the Expedition members developed close relationships with some of the Islanders.

The intended geographical and cultural focus of the Expedition is indicated by Haddon's rough map included in the Agreement signed by the Expedition members prior to departure (Fig. 1.5). However, political and cultural boundaries are porous, shifting over time and according to the person or group that is defining them. This is as relevant to Haddon's ethnological concerns as it is to current socio-politics in the region. The national border between Torres Strait (Australia) and Papua New Guinea was a matter of some dispute. In addition, exchange and kinship networks have continued to provide strong links between the Torres Strait Islanders, particularly those from the northern region,

Figure 1.4 *The congregation after church service at Darnley Island. Darnley was the site of the first contact with the London Missionary Society in the Torres Strait. The date of their arrival on 1 July 1871, commonly known as 'the coming of the light', is still marked by local celebrations. Probably 1898.*

Figure 1.5 Contract signed by the Expedition members prior to departure, with a rough map indicating the regional area of research. 1898.

