Malinowski, Bronislaw (bronɪˈslɔf kɔpˈɛri). 1884–1942, Polish anthropologist in England and the US, who researched into the sexual behaviour of primitive people in New Guinea and Melanesia

A founding father of British social anthropology, Bronislaw Kasper Malinowski (1884-1942) pioneered modern fieldwork methods, re-created the genre of ethnographic writing, promoted applied anthropology in Africa, and contributed to many academic debates and popular causes. At the time of his death in the United States, he was a scientific celebrity, an international humanist committed to the battle against totalitarianism.

**Biography and Major Works**

An only child, Malinowski was born in Cracow, the capital of Galicia in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Both his parents were impoverished gentry of Roman Catholic persuasion, a faith that Malinowski abandoned as a youth. His father was a distinguished professor of Slavic philology at Cracow’s ancient Jagiellonian University. Malinowski’s formal schooling was interrupted by recurrent illnesses, and his mother devoted herself to his education and took him on health-seeking trips to the Mediterranean countries. By the time he was 16, Malinowski spoke several languages and had developed a cosmopolitan outlook. Like his compatriot and literary hero, Joseph Conrad, he would attribute his enthusiasm for the exotic to these early experiences of cultural variation.

Malinowski studied philosophy, physics, and mathematics at the Jagiellonian University, receiving his doctorate with the highest honors in 1908. A significant influence in his youth was his passionate, competitive friendship with Stanislaw I. Witkiewicz, alias Witkacy, a celebrated avant-garde artist and dramatist. Outshone by his friend’s artistic genius, Malinowski directed his own creative ambitions toward science. His brilliant doctoral dissertation on the positivism of Ernst Mach, “On the Principle of the Economy of Thought,” contained the seed of Malinowski’s later functionalism, the anthropological doctrine for which he became renowned. Following in his father’s footsteps, Malinowski spent a year at Leipzig University, where he renounced physical chemistry for the anthropological psychology (Völkerpsychologie) of Wilhelm Wundt and the economic history of Karl Bücher. Initially sparked by a youthful reading of James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*, Malinowski’s interests turned inexorably toward anthropology.

In March 1910, Malinowski traveled to London to continue his studies in ethnology and “primitive sociology” at the London School of Economics, under the supervision of C. G. Seligman and Edward Westermarck. As well as Sir James Frazer, Malinowski befriended A. C. Haddon and W. H. R. Rivers, both of whom, like Seligman, were veterans of the pioneering Cambridge University Torres Straits Expedition of 1898-1899. Each of these men played some part in advancing Malinowski’s early career.

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In 1913, Malinowski published a work begun in Leipzig, *The Family Among the Australian Aborigines*, which his later rival A. R. Radcliffe-Brown praised as a model of scientific method. Based on a critical evaluation of the ethnographic literature, it addressed current controversies about the origin of marriage and the family and overturned the evolutionists’ assumption that the Aborigines practiced “group marriage” and that therefore the individual family could not exist.

The outbreak of war in August 1914 caught Malinowski in Australia on his way to begin fieldwork in Papua (ex-British New Guinea). His 3-month apprentice fieldwork among the coastal communities of southern Papua was of the survey type, as conducted by Haddon and Seligman. Assisted by local missionaries and working through a trade language, he came to realize the deficiencies of this kind of investigation. Returning to Australia for a few months, he dashed off *The Natives of Mailu* (1915), a conventionally structured report guided by the categories of *Notes and Queries in Anthropology*. Although the monograph won him additional funding from the Australian government and helped him earn a DSc degree from the University of London, he belittled it as a mere “pamphlet.”

Malinowski returned to Papua in June 1915, and while waiting for a boat to the north coast, he made a fateful detour to the Trobriand Islands in the northern Massim, an insular region that Seligman had surveyed a decade earlier. Although wary of treading on his supervisor’s ethnographic toes, Malinowski was intellectually captivated by its vibrant culture. Seligman approved his change of location, affording Malinowski the opportunity to put into practice the rules laid down by Rivers (his “patron saint of fieldwork”) for intensive study. He avoided consorting with the resident Europeans by pitching his tent in the chief’s village and quickly learned that close observation of everyday activities yielded unexpected insights into peoples’ lives. Once he had invested time and effort in learning the language of Kiriwina, its ethnographic gifts were his for the asking. He made the recording of “concrete occurrences” and “actual cases,” another cornerstone of his ethnographic method. He amassed documentation—genealogies, sketch maps, plans, photographs, measurements, and vernacular texts on every conceivable subject. Although he was inclined to observe rather than to participate in everyday activities, “participant observation” became the slogan for later generations of field-working anthropologists. He devised “synoptic charts” for summarizing information; they revealed gaps in his data and enabled him to visualize the functional interconnections between institutions. He later used the synoptic charts as teaching aids in the classroom to demonstrate his functional method.

Malinowski interrupted 20 months of intensive fieldwork in the Trobriands with a lengthy break in Melbourne. Although he suffered recurrent bouts of illness, it was a productive period. He began his courtship of Elsie Rosaline Masson, daughter of an eminent Scottish professor of chemistry, whom he later married and with whom he had three daughters. He wrote *Baloma: The Spirits of the Dead in the Trobriand Islands* (1916), a methodologically sophisticated treatise on the sociology of Trobriand religion, which dealt with the ideological underpinnings of matrilineal kinship and the denial of physiological paternity. He sorted his field notes with a view to compiling a comprehensive ethnographic compendium—a mammoth project that he later abandoned in favor of a series of focused monographs. On his second expedition to the Trobriands in 1917-1918, Malinowski concentrated on checking, validating, and enlarging the data he had collected on the previous trip, transcribing oral texts and extending his command of the vernacular.

Under light government surveillance as an enemy alien, he had spent a relatively peaceful war in the islands, though haunted by reports of the terrible events in Europe and devastated by the belated news of his mother’s death in Poland. Fieldwork by immersion in an alien culture had exacted a heavy toll on his health.
psychological price, and Malinowski’s posthumously published field diaries speak poignantly of his lonely ordeal. While A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term (1967) scandalized many readers by its author’s racist expressions and explicit sexual fantasies, it is a ruthlessly honest document, profoundly introspective yet therapeutic, in which Malinowski kept a daily ledger of his achievements, failings, and moral dilemmas. He came to the important realization that his diary and his ethnography were complementary; the former sharpened his insight into the experiences of his native subjects, bringing him closer to the final goal of the ethnographer: “to grasp the native’s point of view ... to realize his vision of his world.”

As the war was about to end, Malinowski returned to Australia “as laden with materials as a camel.” In early 1920, he sailed back to Europe with his bride Elsie and his ethnographic treasures. Following brief sojourns in Scotland and Poland (where Malinowski turned down the offer of a professorship at the Jagiellonian University), the couple spent several months in Tenerife, where Malinowski completed his classic monograph Argonauts of the Western Pacific (1922), a richly detailed account of the canoeborne trade and ceremonial exchange of arm shells and shell necklaces, which linked the Trobriands via the kula circuit to other island groups of the Massim. A preface by Sir James Frazer ensured the successful launch of Argonauts, and although it fell far short of the best-selling status of The Golden Bough, it has never been out of print.

Appointed a lecturer in 1922, a reader in 1924, and foundation professor of social anthropology in 1927, Malinowski’s rise to eminence in the University of London was rapid, and he was granted British citizenship in 1931. He worked extraordinarily hard, teaching, writing, and propagating his views on many contemporary social issues: marriage and the family, divorce, sexual morality, birth control, religion, race, and warfare. He won popular recognition as a polemical essayist and broadcaster. His Socratic seminars at the London School of Economics attracted students from every continent and from different academic disciplines, who catalyzed a heady ferment of ideas. He used what his pupil and colleague Raymond Firth called “intellectual shock tactics” to get his students to think for themselves. His enthusiasm for his subject was that of a prophet, the self-proclaimed “godfather and standard-bearer of the School of Functionalism,” who invented a novel methodology for a new scientific discipline.

In collaboration with the International African Institute, Malinowski won Rockefeller Foundation support for his vision of a “practical anthropology” and advocacy of “an anthropology of the changing native.” Insofar as it addressed colonial policies in Africa, his work in this field amounted to a second anthropological revolution. As well as for the British Colonial Office, he exercised influence as an informal advisor to bodies such as the International Missionary Council, the British Social Hygiene Council, and Mass Observation (which adopted his latest slogan, “Anthropology begins at home”). With Rockefeller funding under International African Institute auspices, he trained a talented cohort of research fellows, including Audrey Richards, Lucy Mair, Hilda Kuper, Meyer Fortes, and Siegfried Nadel. In 1934, he visited students working among the Bemba and the Swazi and conducted some cursory fieldwork of his own among the Arusha and the Chagga.

During his prolific years in London, Malinowski promoted his theories in innumerable essays, book reviews, encyclopedia articles, and lengthy forewords to his students’ books. In his Trobriand monographs, he strived for scientific candor with the principled separation of fact and opinion. He was scrupulous in telling the reader what events he had or had not witnessed, appealing to his “seeing eye” as the hallmark of his authority. Malinowski’s best ethnographic writing is a rhetorical confection of colorful description, reflexive anecdote, native commentary, and theoretical aside. While he aspired to

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be the Joseph Conrad of anthropology, he settled for being its Émile Zola.

Following Argonauts, he published Crime and Custom in Savage Society (1926), a pathbreaking little book that described the workings of quasilegal mechanisms in the Trobriands. His analytical insights into “the binding force of reciprocity” in everyday exchanges and his pioneering use of the case method laid the foundations of legal anthropology. Sex and Repression in Savage Society (1927) was a polemical work that contested Freudian dogma concerning the universality of the Oedipus complex. Malinowski argued that the emotional configuration of the Trobriand family under the rules of matriliny ensured that it was the mother’s brother, not the father, who was the resented authority figure, and it was the sister, not the mother, who was the object of a boy’s incestuous desire. The Sexual Life of Savages (1929) was a comprehensive ethnography of Trobriand courtship, marriage, and domestic life; while avoiding pornography, it amounted to a subversive assault on sexual prudery and hypocrisy, and in the changing mores of the period, it had a liberating appeal. Coral Gardens and Their Magic (1935) dealt exhaustively with horticultural practices and their ritual accompaniments, with the politics and mythological basis of land tenure, and with the poetic language of magic. It was in 1935, after a protracted and debilitating illness, that Elsie died, just before the appearance of Coral Gardens—a work her husband had dedicated to her.

Malinowski had made his first enthusiastic trip to the United States in 1926 on a Rockefeller-sponsored fellowship, and although some members of the Boasian school of American anthropology were antipathetic to the man and his message, he was invited twice more to give lecture tours and notably, in 1936, to receive an honorary doctorate from Harvard University. In 1938, he returned to the United States for a health-seeking sabbatical in Tucson. He visited Indian reservations and taught a seminar at the University of Arizona, followed by a summer school at Smith College, in Northampton, Massachusetts.

With the outbreak of World War II, he was advised by the London School of Economics authorities to remain in the United States, and at the end of 1939, his three daughters left England to join him. To supplement his reduced income, he taught evening classes at the New School for Social Research in New York and accepted a visiting professorship at Yale University. In 1940, he married his long-term partner, the English painter Valetta Swann. They spent the summers of 1940 and 1941 in Mexico, where Malinowski, assisted by a young Mexican anthropologist, Julio de la Fuente, conducted fieldwork on the Zapotec market system of the Oaxaca Valley. Although a Spanish translation of their pioneering report had a significant influence on later studies of market systems, The Economics of a Mexican Market System (1982) was not published in Malinowski’s lifetime.

Following Hitler’s invasion of Poland in September 1939, Malinowski joined the “Great Debate” with a lecturing and writing campaign to convince Americans of the need to fight the German war machine. The war revived his dormant Polish patriotism, and he wrote passionately against the evils of totalitarianism and the menace of rampant nationalism in a series of essays on the anthropology of war, culminating in his posthumously published Freedom and Civilization (1944). He assisted many Jewish friends and colleagues to escape Nazi persecution, though he was less successful in finding them jobs. Indeed, his own position at Yale remained provisional until he was appointed finally to a permanent professorship a month before his death of a heart attack. The evening before he died, on May 16, 1942, he addressed the inaugural meeting of the Polish Institute of Arts and Sciences in America, of which he had been elected president.
Critical Contributions to Anthropology

Malinowski’s move to England in 1913 had been at an opportune moment in the history of British anthropology. His mentors had only recently begun to professionalize the discipline and call for more intensive fieldwork. The “survey” or “rescue” ethnology conducted by researchers like Haddon and Seligman yielded weighty monographs of broad scope but little analytical depth. *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* set a completely new precedent. Malinowski’s explicit intention was to raise ethnographic fieldwork to a professional art, and his self-mythicizing introduction to *Argonauts*—arguably the most influential 25 pages in the history of the discipline—prescribed a mode of research that would become a rite of passage for subsequent generations of anthropologists.

A foundation text of economic anthropology, *Argonauts* can also be read as a theoretical critique of current views of Primitive Economic Man, “a fanciful, dummy creature” motivated by enlightened self-interest. Malinowski introduced a moral dimension; he wanted his account of the kula (which he regarded as the highest expression of the Trobrianders’ conception of value) to dismember this straw figure and dispel the rationalistic conceptions of primitive mankind. Although *Argonauts* was conceived before he had properly developed functionalism, Malinowski’s methodological strategy in the book was to link magic with mythology and both with economic activity in a demonstration of their functional interdependence. Together with A. R. Radcliffe-Brown’s *The Andaman Islanders*, also published in 1922, *Argonauts* signaled the beginning of a decisive paradigm shift in British anthropology—from evolutionary and diffusionist speculations concerning mankind’s past to a social anthropology of the present based on empirically observed and theoretically driven ethnographic accounts of particular societies.

The revolution in anthropology Malinowski sought to promote demanded a broad assault on the “antiquarians” of the ancien regime. His theoretical strategy was to generalize from the Trobrianders in their Melanesian cultural garb to the rest of humankind. Every ethnographic domain—magic and religion, mythology, language, law, sex, kinship, marriage, the family—was vulnerable to Malinowski’s tactic of bringing to bear firsthand data of a depth and complexity none of his opponents could match. Thus did the fruits of intensive fieldwork transform anthropology from the antiquarian study of items of custom into the sociological study of institutions.

Malinowski elaborated a theory of functionalism from 1926 onward, his stated purpose being to discover the laws and regularities that governed social behavior. There were two strands to his functionalism: (1) methodological (inspired by fieldwork practice) and (2) doctrinal (based on the premise that there are cultural universals). Empirical observation, he believed, was the principal scientific activity of anthropology. Through direct field observations, the researcher examines the actual working of a custom or an institution to determine the purpose it serves; this should provide the key to its meaning and the reason for its existence. He taught that there were no facts without theory and that it was functional theory that provided the criteria of relevance for the observation, selection, and recording of data; it also directed the field-worker to new observations, which in turn posed fresh questions. As a matter of fieldwork principle, functionalism required all data to be fully contextualized, that is, treated holistically. Functionalism was thereby a safeguard against the detachment of any custom from its living context.

The doctrinal strand of Malinowski’s functionalism was formalized in his posthumously published *A Scientific Theory of Culture* (1944). Anthropology (“the proper study of mankind”) was the science of

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culture, which sought to develop common measures for the comparative study of cultures. While recognizing that human cultural diversity is the raison d'être of anthropology, his scientific interest lay in the search for what he called the “underlying sameness” of cultures. A culture is a complex instrumental apparatus for the satisfaction of human needs, individual and social. In the satisfaction of man's primary needs (e.g., for food, sex, and shelter), it produces secondary or derived cultural needs, which in turn produce third-order integrative needs. Critics have not been kind to this instrumental, formalistic "system" in which Malinowski invested so much thought. His attempts to elaborate it in light of the behaviorism of his Yale colleagues resulted in even greater complexity; it grew unwieldy and vacuous. If his functionalism survives as a method, its status as grand theory is largely discredited.

**Malinowski's Legacy**

Malinowski's most enduring achievement is his Trobriand corpus, among the most comprehensive and widely read in global ethnography. It continues to stimulate, provoke, and invite reanalysis. His tenets of fieldwork method have become axiomatic, and insofar as anthropologists continue to live among the people they study, they will continue to be guided by his ideas concerning the functional interconnection of the sociocultural phenomena they observe.

Another achievement was his creation of a cohesive school of social anthropology that proliferated for a generation. Established in key academic posts, his students gave the discipline a distinctive intellectual profile. Following Malinowski's departure for the United States, his influence in Britain was temporarily eclipsed by that of Radcliffe-Brown, whose Durkheimian structural functionalism attracted many of Malinowski's erstwhile disciples. *Man and Culture* (1957), a volume in Malinowski's memory edited by his pupil and successor, Raymond Firth, revived the master's reputation. While agreeing that he was an incomparable ethnographer, the majority verdict of the dozen contributors was that he had been a flawed and inconsistent thinker whose psychological functionalism had prevented him from grasping the analytical priority of social systems and structures. But even his most critical pupils acknowledged the theoretical contributions he had made to fields as disparate as kinship, psychoanalysis, mythology, law, economic anthropology, and applied anthropology. His contribution to anthropological linguistics, semantics, and the ethnography of speaking through concepts such as "phatic communion" and "context of situation" also remains seminal.

The publication of his private diaries brought him renewed posthumous fame. They fueled the epistemological and moral crisis of anthropology in the 1970s, when decolonization was focusing attention on the exploitative aspects of the discipline in its alleged role as a “handmaid of Imperialism.” In 1984, Malinowski's centenary yielded another round of evaluations, most importantly by the Polish scholars who rehabilitated Malinowski in his homeland following his disparagement under communism as a reactionary bourgeois anthropologist. In America, meanwhile, postmodernists used Malinowski's diaries for their own rhetorical ends in deconstructing ethnographic authority and denouncing positivism. Ironically, by deploring anthropologists’ romantic infatuation with “the freakish,” he had preempted by half a century the postmodern critique of exoticism. In this new century, Malinowski remains a venerable ancestor and an anthropologist for all seasons.

**See also** Applied Anthropology; Firth, Raymond; Frazer, James G.; Freud, Sigmund; Haddon, Alfred C.; London School of Economics; Radcliffe-Brown, A. R.; Rivers, W. H. R.; Seligman, Charles Gabriel; Torres Straits Expedition; Westermarck, Edward

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