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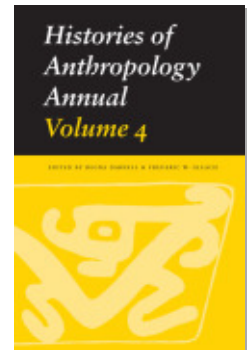
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John Dos Passos and Anthropology

Robert Lawless

Finding the real-life prototypes for various fictional characters has always been a favored enterprise for literary critics and others. The writers of the American Lost Generation have provided considerable material for this exercise. Perhaps the most famous is the use of Agnes von Kurowsky, who was a nurse in an American Red Cross hospital in Milan, Italy, during World War I, as the prototype for Catherine Barkley, the lover of Frederic Henry in Ernest Hemingway's novel *A Farewell to Arms* (1929). The Frenchwoman Germaine Lucas-Championnière was the prototype for Geneviève Rod, the love interest of the character John Andrews (Ludington 1997a:368) in John Dos Passos's World War I novel *Three Soldiers* (1921). (Interestingly both Henry and Andrews deserted around the end of the war, and each lost his woman.)

The use of real-life anthropologists as prototypes is much rarer. Probably the most famous example is found in John Phillips Marquand's novel *Point of No Return* (1949), in which the character Malcolm Bryant is modeled after the famous anthropologist W. Lloyd Warner. Under the cover of the name Yankee City, Warner and his associates spent nearly a decade studying Newburyport, Massachusetts, and in the 1940s produced five volumes that have become classics (see the one-volume 1963 abridged edition). Unfortunately for Warner, Newburyport is the hometown of Marquand, who apparently despised scholars and parodied Warner with a series of stereotypes about professors, writing, for example, "His face with its rather untidy gray hair might have been that of a college professor or some minor employee from a Washington bureau" (1949:40–41). Marquand mentioned several times that Bryant's clothes revealed that he was not a member of a country club. Professors "were pampered, preposterous creatures who lived an artificial life, who did not understand or want to be like other people" (Marquand 1949:56) and who were "dwellers in academic ivory towers" (Marquand 1949:282). In an otherwise well-written and enjoyable novel Marquand only suc-

ceeded in demonstrating that he had no knowledge of anthropology and did not understand social science theories and methods, as many later novels have also demonstrated (cf. MacClancy 2005).

Dos Passos also modeled one of his characters after a famous anthropologist, and his account was much more tempered than Marquand's though perhaps ultimately flawed. Dos Passos even had some limited acquaintance with academic anthropology. In his novel *The Great Days* (1958) Dos Passos introduced a character as an anthropologist and devoted a couple of pages to him. The setting was World War II Honolulu.

As soon as I stepped in the door he introduced a stocky pale brown man with a big head of short wiry gray hair. George Elbert introduced him tersely as the greatest living Maori. Sir James Hawkins turned out to be the famous anthropologist. He had come up from some New Zealand University to give a course at the University of Hawaii, and was advising the navy's survival school on the side. He spoke with an Oxford accent but his knowledge of the islanders of the Pacific was far from academic. Before I arrived he had been showing George Elbert how to make fire with a bow and some charred sticks the way the Fiji people did. He spoke all the languages; he knew all the plants and the winds and the ocean current; he seemed to have been cast away on every atoll.

After a few drinks, in which Sir James, who said with a sly smile that he preferred coconut milk, did not share, we went out on the town.

We dined in a Cantonese restaurant with a Chinese merchant who was a friend of Sir James. There was a young Hawaiian among the company whom Sir James guyed unmercifully partly in English and partly in what seemed to be a succession of Polynesian dialects for forgetting his mother tongue. (1958:117)

A bit later Dos Passos continued,

Sir James was taking us to a dance at the University of Hawaii. It wasn't a very large dance but the company was thoroughly mixed. . . . I stood next to Sir James at the edge of the dance floor, watching the tanned couples in their light brightcolored clothes. He took a collector's pleasure in pointing out the various racial characteristics. There was every kind of North of Europe type, blonde and dark and redhaired, a sprinkling of Jews, here and there a Negro or a mulatto. There were a couple

of young men who belonged to one of the darkskinned races of India. There were some Portuguese, sons and daughters of the Portuguese laborers and fishermen who still occupied the bottom of the heap socially, so he explained. . . .

He showed me every sort of mixture of European blood with Chinese and Japanese or both, sometimes with a touch of Polynesian thrown in. “It’s the melting pot, much more so than New York, but my dear fellow you Americans don’t seem to have the slightest idea of how well you’ve done it. . . . In my opinion out of this melting pot may well come the future of the Pacific. (1958:118–119)

I’ve identified the real-life prototype for “Sir James Hawkins” as Sir Peter Henry Buck (whose Maori name was Te Rangi Hiraō). In 1936 “he was appointed professor of anthropology at Yale and director of the Bishop Museum [in Honolulu]—concurrent posts he held until his death [in 1951]” (Allen 1997:1027). He and Dos Passos were both in Honolulu during World War II.

According to one of his biographers, “Buck claimed to have been born in 1880, but a more likely date is sometime in October 1877 as recorded in his primary school register. For most of his life he believed that [a Maori] Ngarongo-ki-tua was his natural mother. She had married Peter’s father, William Henry Buck, at Urenui, Taranaki, in the early 1870s. But their marriage was childless and, in accordance with Maori custom, a near relative, Rina [also a Maori], came into the household to provide William Buck with a child. Rina died soon after Peter was born so he was nurtured by Ngarongo” (Sorrenson 2006). “Buck sometimes described his Pakeha [European] ancestors as Irish; his family was descended from Protestant English migrants to Ireland. His father, born in County Galway, came to New Zealand in 1862 via the Australian gold-fields and tried his luck as a digger in Westland and Thames, while also serving in the Armed Constabulary” (Sorrenson 2006).

Dos Passos’s quoting of Sir James as extolling the virtues of the melting pot of the Pacific was certainly in character with the politics and beliefs of Sir Peter, who was the product of an English-Maori union and who himself married a New Zealander of English background. According to another of his biographers, “He was both Maori and Pakeha and lost few opportunities to point out that he was a half-caste—a true New Zealander, he would boast to his friends, and a portent of the future. Conscious of the stigma sometimes attached to the word, he went out of his way to claim that he was an example of the mixture of peoples that would make New Zealand unique” (Condliffe 1971:20–21).

The passage in which Sir James pointed out “every sort of mixture of European blood with Chinese and Japanese or both, sometimes with a touch of Polynesian thrown in” (Dos Passos 1958:119) is problematic. It is not entirely clear whether Sir James was referring to the “race mixture” of people he already knew or whether he was identifying people with specific “mixtures” strictly from their physical appearance. In the latter case anthropologists, of course, know that identifying, for example, Chinese hapa haole as differentiated from Japanese hapa haole would be an absurdly impossible exercise. I doubt that any well-trained anthropologist even in the 1940s thought this was possible. Although Sir Peter’s formal training was as a medical physician, he did field-work with anthropologists and he did hold a position as a professor of anthropology.

Certainly little exists in Sir Peter’s ethnographies to suggest that he thought it possible to distinguish ethnic groups solely by their appearance (see Buck 1932a, 1932b, 1934, 1938, 1950a). His writings on material culture did not include the physical appearance of members of the various ethnic groups (see Buck 1927, 1930, 1944, 1950b, 1957). The only writing that came close to attempting to identify ethnic groups by physical appearance was coauthored with Harry L. Shapiro and included the anthropomorphic measurements of Cook Islanders in the 1930s. Even though the measurements were made by Sir Peter, the text and the conclusions were those of Shapiro, who pointed out that the inter-island differences were so great that it was difficult to settle on a physical type for the Cook Islanders in general (see Shapiro and Buck 1936).

Dos Passos may have been simply reflecting a common lay misconception, certainly prevalent during World War II, that ethnic groups, particularly Chinese and Japanese, could be identified simply from their physical appearance. Dos Passos’s acquaintance with anthropology was probably too brief to disabuse him of this notion. His biographer wrote, “He heard of the army’s plan to allow qualified soldiers to study at various European universities, so he applied and was accepted to study anthropology at the Sorbonne in Paris. Early in March 1919 he arrived in Paris, ostensibly to begin his studies but really to enjoy the city and write” (Ludington 1997b:xiv).

In his autobiography Dos Passos wrote,

Luckily I had already signed up for the Sorbonne Detachment. College students, if they gave up their priority for repatriation, were allowed to study that spring of 1919 in European universities. I picked the University of Paris and was soon foregather-

ing with a number of cronies at Mme. Leconte's on the Quai d'Anjou.

I took courses at the School of Anthropology in Greek and Roman religions, and in Mayan culture, and listened to an excellent lecture on *Aucassin and Nicolette*. Since it was near the tail end of the semester, and I had no clues as to what had gone before, I made little headway in any of these subjects, but I did write my head off every morning [on the manuscript for *Three Soldiers*].

Somehow I obtained a leave when the courses closed at the Sorbonne to go to London [to negotiate with the publishers Allen and Unwin for the publication of *One Man's Initiation: 1917*]. Back in France I found the Sorbonne detachment dissolved. (1966:77)

He was released from the army on July 11, 1919, and left for Spain (Ludington 1980:75). It is doubtful that Dos Passos learned much anthropology from a lecture on *Aucassin et Nicolette*, which is a medieval French chateaufable and is the only known survivor of a once popular oral tradition well established by the twelfth century.

My research suggests that this was the only time a real-life anthropologist was used as a prototype for a novelist of the Lost Generation and that this is also the first time that the prototype for Dos Passos's "Sir James" has been definitively identified.

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