Envisioning Sociology

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This book is the first to report on the sociological project of Victor Branford, Patrick Geddes, and their circle. While a number of biographies and discussions of Patrick Geddes have appeared, these concentrate on his work in urban planning. When considered within the wider social sciences he is often considered only as a planner or geographer, and not a sociologist. Mention of Victor Branford has been confined, at best, to the footnotes in histories of sociology, yet he was the leading organizational and intellectual figure in the early days of British sociology. The two stood at the heart of a vast international network of connections within the social sciences. Our book is predicated on the view that an assessment of their ideas and their practical work is long overdue.

The book has been a long time in preparation and many debts have been incurred during that time. John Scott’s interest in the area was encouraged by a question raised by Sabita Branford, granddaughter of Victor Branford, at a meeting on British sociology at the London School of Economics. The project has also benefited from the discovery of family papers (now in the Keele University Archive) by Jean Branford, a distant relative of Branford’s cousin who settled in South Africa. Much of the early research was undertaken jointly with Chris Husbands, who co-authored some early papers but was unable to continue to be involved in the project. We are immensely grateful to Chris for his continuing collaboration in our discussions. Ray Bromley’s interest in the area stemmed from interest in Patrick Geddes’s contributions to urban planning and from family connections close to Keele University.

Many archivists, family historians, and fellow social scientists have helped us track down obscure items of information. These are too numerous to name individually, but we have tried to indicate a number of these people in the endnotes of the book. We are grateful to all of them for making this book possible. The book is a true transatlantic and interdisciplinary cooperation, for both the authors and those who have helped us in our task. The two authors have met on a number of occasions but have pursued a largely electronic relationship for the best part of a decade. Each has undertaken library and archival research and the results have been shared for joint
discussion and further development. It has been a hugely enjoyable and rewarding process.

The works discussed in the book are very much products of their time. This is especially apparent in the male-oriented language used and in what now seem rather archaic views of gender roles. While we have discussed the substantive biases and prejudices that appear in their work when discussing gender and women, we have not routinely noted or corrected the use of inappropriate pronouns. Despite this gender bias, it is striking that Branford and Geddes were among the few social scientists of their time who did actually regard the question of gender as a major topic for sociological discussion.

Victor Branford came from a large family and we have tried to ensure that the particular Branford we refer to in the text is always clear, either from the context or by explicit use of a first name. Biographical citations to “Branford” are always citations to Victor Branford, unless otherwise indicated, and other Branfords are distinguished by their initials where any doubt could arise. Where any confusion may arise, we cite Victor Branford as “V. V. Branford.” Citations to the work of Sybella Branford are made using the name under which she was published at the time, except that papers by “Mrs. V. Branford” are cited as “S. Branford.”

A great deal of biographical information has been acquired on the numerous individuals in and around the circle centered on Branford and Geddes. Material concerning the family members of the leading protagonists are included in the two appendices. Appendix A relates the relevant details of the life of William Branford, father of Victor Branford. Appendix B provides briefer biographies of members of the families of Victor Branford, Sybella Gurney, and Patrick Geddes. Other biographical details can be found in the online database at https://sites.google.com/site/sociologysource/thelbranfordproject2/thelbranfordproject3.

We hope that our readers will enjoy reading this book as much as we have enjoyed writing it.

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