

The Rockefeller Foundation and the Modern Australian University, 1926-1942

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In 2011 I received a Rockefeller Grant-in-Aid for my project which enabled me to conduct a whirlwind trip to the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) to collect as much material as I could on the relationship between the Rockefeller Foundation (RF) and Australian universities in the interwar period. After a couple of days of detailed reading and taking notes from a variety of sources, it soon became abundantly clear that the RAC holdings on this topic were so rich that even by limiting the topic I would not get through the material without the generous offer made to photocopy significant items. Ten days later I headed back to my university in Australia, filled with ideas about this topic and looking forward to reading the material in an even more contemplative manner. The large bundle of photocopied material joined me about a month later, and in the course of wrapping up marking and other duties for the year, I have yet to reflect fully on the implications of what I found. In the meantime however, I am offering an introductory report on some of my preliminary thoughts.

From the mid 1920s, the RF saw new opportunities to extend its interest to Australia, and was particularly attracted to Australian universities as possible sites of research into the Pacific. Initially there was interest in providing RF funding for Australian medical programs, specifically the medical program at the University of Sydney. However, I was not so much interested in the RF's reasons for funding Sydney's medical program, as I was in the

preliminary research conducted by the RF into the state of Australian universities in the 1920s. I was quite interested in the reports by RF officers who were sent out to assess the suitability of universities for their medical funding. In these reports the observers go far beyond the narrow assessment of university medical programs to examine the idea of the Australian university and its place within Australian society and this information was sent back to the RF for assessment, grant monies were paid, and the reports, no doubt, filed. However, as I trawled my way through the rest of the archives, the significance of these reports became apparent – they were an attempt to understand the nature and character of Australia. The reports themselves are well-thumbed and references to them appear in the officer's diaries and memoranda. These reports became the basis of the RF's knowledge about Australia, its place in the world, and also to understand not only its universities, but its people as well.¹

It also seems that the reports were used by other Americans intending to visit Australia to search out funding prospects, including those sent out by the Carnegie Corporation of New York in the late 1920s and early 1930s, who consulted the RF in regard to their Australian-Pacific ventures. Such inter-organization relationships illuminate potentially interesting networks between these two American philanthropic organizations and partnerships with Australian universities they helped to foster. While this will need greater study – as well as a comparison with Carnegie Corporation records – it is clear that the launch of, and generally enthusiastic reception to American philanthropy in Australian universities, in the interwar period, shows a willingness for Australian institutions to engage in the world of ideas outside the British Empire.

The RF's interests in interwar Australia, especially in universities, provides an alternative view to understanding American-Australian relations in this period. Historians of Australian foreign relations such as Norman Harpur, P. G. Edwards, Carl Bridge, Neville

Meaney, and others, have argued that diplomatic channels between the two countries were almost non-existent, compounded by tense trade relations, due to Australia's 'closed Empire market' approach.² By focusing instead however on cultural, intellectual and educational relations, a different picture emerges, one in which the American tradition of philanthropy played an earlier and relatively positive role in American and Australian interwar relations. In a groundbreaking essay entitled "Future America," historian Noel McLachlan explored the "role of 'America' in the thinking of British colonials," a theme taken up by historian Richard Waterhouse in his pioneering work on the history of Australian popular culture. However, RF sources that chart relationships between Americans and Australians in the 1920s and 1930s show an emerging internationalism, with not only a willingness of Australians to look outside the British Empire and become the "future America," but also a challenge to the isolationism that marked the United States in this period.

Of immediate interest to me was how the RF became involved in the foundation of the discipline of anthropology in Australia.

In 1924, the RF considered a proposal by the Galton Society, established by the eugenicist Madison Grant in 1918, but with prominent connections to the New York Museum of Natural History and through the University of London, with Grafton Elliot Smith, an important figure in the founding of anthropology as a university discipline. Grant wanted the Galton Society to undertake a significant scientific project, consequently he forwarded a proposal to the RF to fund a study on Australian Aborigines stating, "I trust this plan will appeal to Mr. Rockefeller because the study of primitive man is the best approach to a proper understanding of the artificial conditions of selection now operating in civilized communities."³ The RF was enthusiastic about a study of Australian Aborigines – having had strong support from academics such as Elliot Smith – but was still hesitant to enter a relationship with the Galton Society.

At this juncture, the enthusiasm was confined to England and North America. No one had actually consulted the Australians. The RF then made a crucial decision – it would ascertain the interest of Australian universities – and then encourage them to approach their organization for funding. RF officers explained to the Galton Society the importance of having the support of the Australian universities. Nevertheless, the Galton Society’s project was essentially sidelined in preference to establishing relationships with Australian universities. RF officers then explored potential interest in Australia. They asked Grafton Elliot Smith from the University of London, who was Australian, to “discuss the matter informally, and leave with the authorities the initiative and responsibility for outlining any proposals which they might wish to make in the matter and which later might be considered by the Foundation upon their merits.”⁴

In Australia there had already been attempts to establish a department of anthropology at the University of Sydney which had failed due to lack of government funds. According to Elliot Smith, his visit helped to revive interest in both state and federal governments to support this initiative. Smith recommended that the RF provide research funds to the new department. Events moved swiftly, and a chair in anthropology was established at the University of Sydney through the unusual funding cooperation between both the federal and state governments in Australia, and universities also joined forces to apply to the RF for research funds for distribution to relevant projects by the Australian National Research Council (ANRC).⁵

The ANRC had been established a few years earlier as a national body to fund and facilitate research, and it was through this mechanism that many research projects from Sydney’s new department of anthropology were generously funded. After further consultation with Australian universities, the RF resolved “that the Executive Committee be authorized to commit the Foundation in an amount not to exceed one hundred thousand

dollars and for a period of not more than five years toward co-operation with Australian universities in ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDIES.”⁶ In addition, the RF was prepared to meet the traveling expenses and salaries of the visiting professors and/or investigators in anthropology for up to \$10,000 per annum for a period of five years, amounting to a possible contribution of \$150,000 over the period of 1926 through 1931.⁷ Indeed, the visiting program enabled a number of recently graduated research students, often from Smith’s laboratory, to come to Australia as field researchers and upon completion of their work, find academic positions in Australian universities and elsewhere in the world.

One such ‘fellow’ was A. P. Elkin. He was awarded a Rockefeller fellowship in 1927 to conduct field work in the Kimberley, Western Australia. Elkin became the second professor of anthropology at Sydney University in 1933, and he would end up having a profound influence on Aboriginal anthropology for more than three decades. During my research trip I was able to collect records on dozens of fellows funded under the RF fellowship scheme for research in Australia, much of which was in anthropology. Analysis of these records and further research into the Australian archives is likely to reveal its importance in training a generation of young scholars in anthropological field research, who then went on to become academics and senior policy advisers to government.

This brief outline of the establishment of anthropology as a university discipline in Australia raises a number of interesting points. First, American philanthropy was important at a time when Australian universities were not yet funded as research institutions, yet had within their ranks academics interested in conducting local research. While the RF archives clearly show an interest by the RF in the 1920s in anthropology, can such philanthropic interest be seen as a form of American cultural imperialism?

W. F. Connell and Michael White have established that the Carnegie Corporation’s funding of educational research into Australian schools – through the Carnegie Corporation

establishment and funding of the Australian Council of Educational Research – had a strong hegemonic influence on local conditions.⁸ However, in the case of the RF funding of anthropology, the evidence in the archives points to a more complex answer. The records clearly show a determined attempt by the RF to take a lead in anthropological studies on race in Australia, yet that initiative stopped short of imposing RF projects (resourced, for example, with American academics), or having a say in what projects should go ahead. Instead, the RF gently probed Australian interests and funded projects recommended by Australian experts.

Interestingly, in notes prepared for a conference of the RF president and directors on the aims, policies and programs, the following appeared:

I. General Guiding Principle: the Advancement of Knowledge 1. No grandiose, comprehensive plan for world-wide propaganda. 2. Attempt gradually to become familiar with significant national and international institutions and personnel. 3. Be ready to consider a limited number of opportunities for aid in any field of human knowledge and cultural productivity. 4. Take the initiative in proposing certain developments of research and of progress in the sciences and arts.⁹

This was written in the 1920s and indicates an intention to tread softly, softly, if with firm resolve.

Probably more useful than the cultural imperialism view is to see this philanthropy as a form of ‘soft diplomacy’ – the opening of channels of communication between Americans and Australians that engaged the British Empire, the Pacific, and helped create new transnational intellectual networks, or what might be called “empires of knowledge.” The significance for Australians is that these new networks supplemented British networks. Presumably for the U.S., such international philanthropy was important in creating a new empire of knowledge, with the U.S. as the center in the Pacific region, and as an equal partner with Britain in the transatlantic world.

Interestingly, underlying this internationalizing of academic disciplines in Australia was the emerging national research agenda. Until just after World War I, Australian universities served the interests of the local state, not the nation. In this new era, there was

new recognition of the importance of universities to the nation state. While “national significance” was not to become important to universities until World War II and after, the story of the RF’s philanthropy to Australia in the interwar period reveals a new dimension to universities as contributing to national research. The RF’s offer to fund anthropology came at a time when Australian universities were beginning to work together as part of a national enterprise, and as a result they requested the RF to give the funds to a newly created national body that would, through the representation of Australian universities, make funding decisions.

Finally, the records indicate the changing nature of anthropology from a racial study of anatomy based in medical faculties, to a cultural study of race, a fundamental discipline in the emerging social sciences. I intend to trace this strand of inquiry in Australian university archives in light of new work about the history of anthropology, as well as exploring the types of projects undertaken as a consequence of RF funding.¹⁰

My time at the RAC also enabled me to understand the processes by which the RF made decisions. For example, in the mid 1920s RF officers’ conferences on policy revealed that the RF’s Board was only interested in funding projects by government organizations (not private organizations) and ones that would become self-sustaining.¹¹ The Officers Conferences also revealed discussions about the fellowships program, which was largely developed to identify “talented and productive persons,” and provide the sort of relevant experience that equipped them for the first stage of their career – in the case of anthropology, field research experience both provided skills to recent graduates as well as helped develop such skills for the discipline. Of particular interest were the debates about special fellowships for “mature and experienced workers” – often a request from the Australians, who wanted not only talented young scholars, but the exchange of intellectual expertise.¹²

There is clearly more work to be done, to match what I found in the RAC with my findings in the Australian university archives. In the meantime, my research trip to the RAC to explore American-Australian intellectual relations produced a large body of material which I look forward to analyzing more deeply in the year ahead.

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The ideas and opinions expressed in this report are those of the author and are not intended to represent the Rockefeller Archive Center.

ENDNOTES:

¹ Carter, William S, CPN-1, Medical Education in Australia, 1924, General considerations – Sydney, 1.1, Projects, Series Australia, Series 410A, Box 1, Folders 3 and 3A; Wissler, Clark, Report of a visit to Research Institutions in New Zealand and Australia during the year 1925, 1.1 Projects, Series 410D, box 4, folder 42.

² On the changing nature of Australia's foreign relations in this period see, for example, Carl Bridge and Bernard Attard, *Between empire and nation: Australia's external relations from Federation to the Second World War*. Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2000; P. G. Edwards, editor, *Australia through American Eyes, 1935-1945: Observations by American Diplomats*. St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1979.

³ Madison Grant to Raymond B. Fosdick, 29 December 1923, 1.2 Projects, Series 410D, Australia, Box 3, Folder 23, Anthropology, January-May 1924.

⁴ Minutes, May 7 1924, 'Study of Australian Aborigines', 1.2 Projects, Series 410D, Australia, Box 3, Folder 23, Anthropology, January-May 1924.

⁵ Australian National Research Council (Anthropology) 1926, 1.2 Projects, Series 410D, Australia, Box 3, Folder 29.

⁶ Minutes, November 11, 1924, 'Anthropological Research in Australia', 1.2 Projects, Series 410D, Australia, Box 3, Folder 23, Anthropology, January-May 1924.

⁷ Embree to the Vice-Chancellor of Sydney University, 28 May, 1926, 1.2 Projects, Series 410D, Australia, Box 3, File 25, Anthropology 1925-26.

⁸ Michael White, "Carnegie Philanthropy in the Australia in the nineteen thirties – a Reassessment." *History of Education Review* 26: 1 (1997), pp. 1-24; The Cultural Hegemony Approach is best seen in the work of Robert Arno, *Philanthropy and Cultural Imperialism: Foundations at Home and Abroad*. Boston, Massachusetts: G.K. Hall & Company, 1980; Edward Berman "Foundations, United States Foreign Policy, and African Education, 1945-1975." *Harvard Educational Review* 49: 2 (1979), pp. 145-179; Donald Fisher, *Fundamental Development of the Social Sciences: Rockefeller, Philanthropy and the United States Social Science Research Council*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993; See also, Kathleen McCarthy, "The History of Philanthropy and Nonprofits." *Third Sector Review* 4: 2, 1998, pp. 7-22.

⁹ Officers' Conferences, 1919-1928, Appendix, RG 3 Administration Program and Policy, Series 904, Officers Conferences, Box 2, Folder 14.

¹⁰ John S. Gilkeson, *Anthropologists and the Rediscovery of America, 1886-1965*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010; also, there is new work on Claude Levi-Strauss and the development of anthropology.

¹¹ Minutes, 7 May, 1926, RG 3 Administration Program and Policy, Series 904, Officers' Conferences, Box 2, Folder 12, Staff Minutes 1920-1927.

¹² Office Conference, 5 May, 1925, RG 3 Administration Program and Policy, Series 904, Officers' Conferences, Box 2, Folder 13, Officers Conferences 1919-1928.