

Discover...

BEATRICE MARY BLACKWOOD

Beatrice Blackwood has become a legendary figure in the post-war history of the Pitt Rivers Museum. She worked at the Museum from the late 1930s right through her official retirement in 1959, and was still at work until a few days before her death in 1975. Schuyler Jones, who was Director of the Museum from 1985-1996, remembered that,

‘She was our database in the days before computers. She either knew or had a very good idea of where anything in the museum might be found...she had an excellent memory. She could therefore identify almost anything that was brought in for identification and go directly to the relevant section of our own collections to turn up half a dozen objects like it.’ (Jones 1994)



▲ Portrait of Beatrice Blackwood, probably taken in the 1960s, 1998.356.1

Beatrice Mary Blackwood was born in 1889 in London. As an undergraduate at Somerville College, Oxford, from 1908-1912, she studied English Literature and Language. She returned to Oxford in 1916 to study for the Diploma in Anthropology, gaining a distinction in 1918.

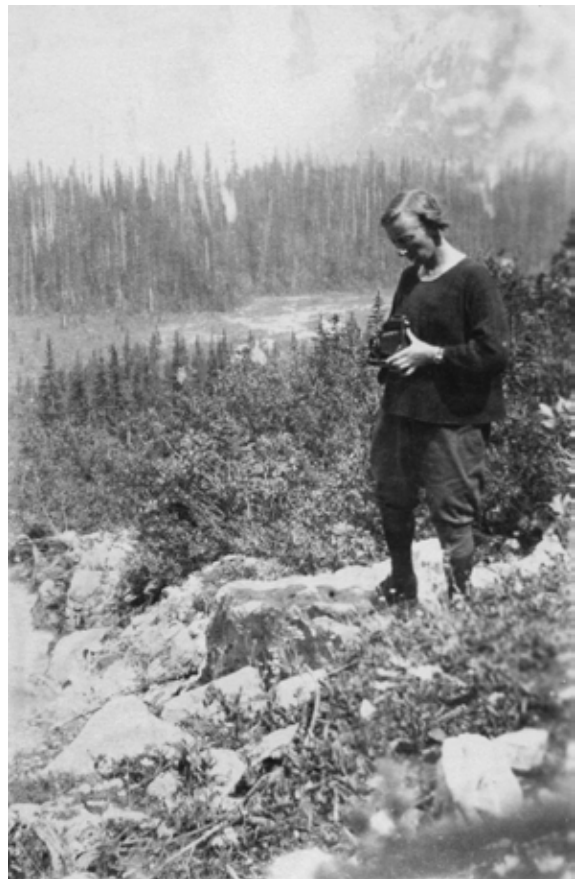
She spent her early career working in the Human Anatomy Department at Oxford, under Arthur Thomson, the Professor of Anatomy. The Department was housed in the University Museum of Natural History at that time, and both Thomson and Henry Balfour, who was Curator of the Pitt Rivers Museum, had taught Blackwood as part of her Diploma studies. She began working as Thomson’s research assistant in 1918 and became Departmental Demonstrator two years later, a position which involved teaching physical anthropology to students, as well as researching and cataloguing the anatomy collections.

In 1924 Blackwood was awarded a Laura Spelman Rockefeller Fellowship and went to North America. She spent the next three years travelling across the United States and Canada gathering anthropometric data from African-American, Native American, Asian and white communities. Her work contributed to a survey being carried out by the National Research Council. She also collected a number of objects for the Pitt Rivers Museum while she was away.

Back in Oxford, in 1928, she was promoted to University Demonstrator in the Human Anatomy Department. However, in 1929 she set out on another field trip, this time to New Guinea with funding from the National Research Council in Washington, D.C. She was away for 18 months, and for much of that time she was based in the Northern Solomon Islands, in the Pacific Ocean, on the islands of Buka and Bougainville, where she studied every aspect of local life and built up a large collection of objects, over 400 of which were donated to the Pitt Rivers Museum when she got back to Oxford. In 1935 she published 'Both Sides of Buka Passage'.

In 1936, changes in the staffing structure of the Human Anatomy Department following the death of Arthur Thomson in 1935 meant that Blackwood was transferred to the Pitt Rivers Museum as University Demonstrator in Ethnology. Her move coincided with her second field trip to Melanesia. This time she was travelling under the auspices of the Pitt Rivers Museum to gather material for the collections. She worked in New Guinea and New Britain for nearly 18 months. As a result of this trip well over 2,000 objects were accessioned into the collections at the Pitt Rivers Museum.

Less than a year after her return to Oxford in 1938, Henry Balfour died and Blackwood was left to run the Pitt Rivers with her friend and colleague Tom Penniman, who became the Museum's second Curator. Together, with the help of a number of Museum volunteers, they began to systematize the Museum's accession records: creating a card-catalogue with entries for every single object in the collection. In 1970, at the request of visiting researchers, she published 'The Classification of Artefacts in the Pitt Rivers Museum'. Blackwood continued



▲ Beatrice Blackwood taking a photograph during her fieldwork in Yoho Valley, Vancouver, Canada in 1925, 1998.442.98-.105

to teach anthropology and archaeology to numerous generations of Oxford students studying for the Diploma in Anthropology. She was made Lecturer in Ethnology in 1946. She also dealt with hundreds of enquiries from researchers, academics, students and members of the public over the years.

Although she never undertook another intensive field research trip, she continued to travel extensively and maintained an impressive correspondence with friends and colleagues throughout the world. She was awarded the Rivers Memorial Medal for her exemplary fieldwork in 1943. She was a member of the Folklore Society Council and the Council for British Archaeology; she became a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries in 1948, and served as Vice-President of the Royal Anthropological Institute.

Blackwood became an indispensable member of the Museum's staff, with her encyclopaedic knowledge of the collections. She is remembered as helpful and thoughtful, but she could also be out-spoken and was stickler for correct museological practices and procedures. She commanded great respect, but she was an incredibly private person and was happy to work quietly in the background most of the time.

Further reading

Gacs, Ute; Aisha Khan, Jerrie McIntyre & Ruth Weinberg (eds.) 1989. "*Beatrice Mary Blackwood (1889-1975)*" in *Woman Anthropologists: Selected Biographies*. University of Illinois Press, University of Chicago

Knowles, Chantal 2004 '*Blackwood, Beatrice Mary (1889-1975)*' entry for the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography

Simpson, Colin 1953. "*A Woman of Oxford lives with the Kukukukus*" in *Adam With Arrows: Inside New Guinea*. pp. 64-84. Angus and Robertson, Sydney

Extract from the Friends of the Pitt Rivers Museum 10th Anniversary Newsletter. "*Beatrice Blackwood Remembered.*" p.4-6. contributions from Schuyler Jones, Bob Rivers, Catherine Fagg and Kenneth Kirkwood

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