

The Victorian curator who railed against racism and imperialism

Alfred Cort Haddon of the Natural History Museum foreshadowed today's anti-racism campaigns with his crusade against colonialism and his belief that humankind is united by 'common impulses,' writes *Ciarán Walsh*

In 1893, the *Daily Irish Independent* began publishing a column called 'Rambles in the Natural History Museum'. The innocent-sounding title belied its content.

The author was Alfred Cort Haddon, a Cambridge-trained zoologist who had become the spokesman for a group of radicals who believed that anthropologists were obliged to confront institutional racism and genocide. At a time when the Black Lives Matter movement has brought colonial legacies into focus, his message still resonates.

Haddon believed that humankind is united by "common impulses and sympathies". In two public lectures at the Royal Dublin Society in February 1890, he presented his findings from an 1888 trip to the islands of the Torres Strait, between Australia and Papua New Guinea. These included several shots of native bodies stripped of the shapeless dresses provided by missionaries. Haddon used these images to illustrate male initiation ceremonies and courtship, pointing out that women were free to choose their own partners. An advanced thinker on sex and gender, he enjoyed shocking prudish people as way of making them think about differences between people in a new way.

His audience would have had little exposure to the inhabitants of overseas colonies — and anything they did see tended to be brutally racist. For example, in 1886, Dan Lowrey's Music Hall in Dublin (now the Olympia) hosted a "human zoo", an exhibition of members of the San people of the Kalahari. A newspaper advertisement described it as the "sixth appearance in Ireland of ... the African Earthmen, the very lowest form of the human race".

'SAVAGE' SOCIETIES

The idea of a human zoo would have appalled Haddon. He made a lot of friends in the Torres Strait and when he returned to London, he wrote several articles about the islanders and the degradation they suffered at the hands of British colonists. This caught the attention of a group of scientists, writers and artists who believed that the new sciences of anthropology and sociology provided a way to address problems created by rapid industrialisation in Britain.

Haddon decided to become an anthropologist and entered a network of fringe movements that were interested in socialism but stopped short of advocating revolution. They took a gradualist approach influenced by the idea that societies, like animals, evolve.

To Haddon, so-called 'savage' societies represented models of good practice in social organisation. He and his group were influenced by Pyotr Kropotkin, a Russian. Kropotkin spent time living in small communities in Siberia and became convinced that co-operation rather than competition was the key to survival in such a harsh environment. He disagreed with Thomas Henry Huxley, the British biologist known as "Darwin's bulldog", that physical force was the only guarantee of success in the struggle for existence.



'A model of natural communism': Michael Faherty and two women that Haddon met on Inis Meáin. 'Faherty refused to be measured, and the women would not even tell us their names,' Haddon wrote

Kropotkin's influence became even more apparent when Haddon switched his attention to the Aran Islands in the summer of 1890. He called them "the most remarkable islands I have as yet come across anywhere", believing he had discovered the sort of community that the reformists dreamed of. In a slideshow presented on his return to Dublin, he depicted the islanders as a model of natural communism.

The presentation began with an acknowledgment to the recurring threat of famine in the islands. This brought him into conflict with the British authorities. One senior figure had criticised the islanders' expectation of relief whenever the fishing failed or their crops were blighted. Without real work, the official seemed to suggest, the islanders became agents of their own demise.

Haddon had witnessed the effect of that sort of thinking in the Torres Strait and this seems to have prompted him to write an uncompromising critique of British imperialism. He argued that differences in tradition, language and religion made friction inevitable in the colonies, but the undisguised racism and ruthless exploitation that went on was difficult to comprehend for anyone who had not been to the colonies. He referred to the near-total extermination of aboriginal Tasmanians in the early 1800s as "legalised murder" and declared that the British wiped out the inhabitants in countries that they had annexed, whether by accident or design, fast or slow.

His manuscript was rejected by several magazines, so he sent it to Huxley, who suppressed it on

the grounds that it would be unacceptable to the British government. Given that Haddon had been appointed assistant curator of the Natural History Museum on Huxley's recommendation, this could be read as a warning. Haddon backed off and resorted to allegory when it came to writing a serialised guide to the museum for the *Daily Irish Independent* — a precursor to this newspaper.

At first glance, he seemed to toe the party line. He set out the evolutionists' stall in his first article. "There is no biologist who has frankly faced the facts of life who can honestly deny that evolution has operated and is still in force," he wrote. He made it clear, though, that his idea of evolution was different to Huxley's.

The difference between old-school and modern zoologists, he said, "may be expressed in two words — they looked for differences, we look for resemblances". Haddon is using a coded version of Kropotkin's belief that scientists dealing with colonised peoples should dispel racism by emphasising the unity of humankind.

Having set the scene, Haddon took readers on a subversive tour of the museum. He began at

a cabinet containing the skeletons of a human and human-like apes. This case was worthy of special study, he wrote, because it illustrated "those facts of animal life and structures which teach us the history of races". Haddon was engaging his readers in a then divisive debate: whether race represented variation within a single species or, as racist biologists argued, different species that could be classified on a scale ranging from aborigines to Anglo-Saxons. Haddon did

not press the point. Race was a sensitive issue in Ireland in 1893, where the capacity of supposedly emotionally chaotic Celts to govern themselves was a theme in racially charged debates over home rule. Haddon was aware of this.

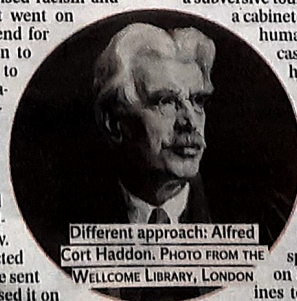
Switching to a cabinet containing a rook, hooded crow and magpie, he explained the system of classifying animals. He drew the reader into a coded discussion of variation, meaning differences in size and colour in a single species. Variation led to survival of the fittest, used by some as an evolutionary justification for a "dog eat dog" political economy. Haddon, though, questioned others' emphasis on force in what Huxley termed the "struggle for existence". He argued that intuition, intelligence, moral qualities, nurture and co-operation between 'animals' contributed as much to survival.

Haddon resumed his overt attacks on British imperialism in a speech in Ipswich in 1895, taking the lead in a carefully planned insurgency by reformist elements within anthropology. That movement has been overlooked in histories of colonialism in Ireland.

His defence of the victims of imperialism resonates with contemporary calls for solidarity with the San in the Kalahari, the Awá in the Amazon and other people who are threatened by land-grabs and genocide in 2020. Célia Xakriabá called out President Jair Bolsonaro's treatment of Brazil's indigenous peoples in a video posted by Tribal Voice, an online campaign against racial violence and genocide.

"We are," Xakriabá says, "living in a moment of legislated genocide," echoing Haddon's call for an end to legalised murder. In this context, his campaigning was a precursor of the anti-racism campaigns of today.

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Different approach: Alfred Cort Haddon. PHOTO FROM THE WELLCOME LIBRARY, LONDON