INTRODUCTION

Anthropologists Charles and Brenda Seligman occupy margins and footnotes in history. Their names have been associated controversially with the dark narratives of race and looting, and their once legendary generosity and hospitality in education and institution building is now ignored. Their collections gifted to museums – magnificent jades, bronzes, Chinese porcelain, artefacts, tools, weaponry and masks – are seen by millions of people each year, but the Seligman name is not prominent. Even at the institution where Seligman fathered the first generation of social anthropologists, the London School of Economics (LSE), his name was not familiar. This changed when the institution's project to decolonize the curriculum exposed Seligman's work on the races of Africa and his name was purged from a library built in his memory (O'Byrne 2020). Removing the unethical vestiges of colonialism, particularly in teaching anthropology, is a pedagogical project for libraries, archives and museums, where language and practices can perpetuate oppression. Wiping out the corporate memory of significant benefactors based on narrow contemporary ethical criteria, applied to one dimension of their life's work, is a new inequity.

Charles Seligman suffered many inequities. He was begrudgingly given a place on the Cambridge University Torres Strait Expedition of 1898 as last man, only because he paid his own way. As a Jew, his name was expunged from academic research on fascism in the 1930s, for fear of his prejudices. The worst attacks on his academic standing came from the student he most supported and promoted, Bronislaw Malinowski. Yet Seligman was generally loved by students. His fatherly generosity extended to many who became distinguished professors and still wanted his approbation.

This book is not an attempt to sanitize Charles Seligman's physical and psychological anthropology. It explores the emergence of his shared career with his educated but unqualified wife, Brenda Seligman, in a tumultuous world of uncertain values. In establishing the careers of a generation of great anthropologists, they were

known for kindness. Their place was unique in a small, rapidly growing academic community, where they exercised gifts of friendship and benevolence. The presence of so many of their lifetime colleagues in this book is essential in showing the Seligmans' priorities and humanity. They transcended barriers of gender and religion, opening the way for women and Jews when most institutions were conspiratorially locked against them. The Seligmans refused to see themselves as victims of anti-Semitic limitations, although Seligman was excluded as both an enemy alien and a Jewish academic up until his death.

As a nineteenth-century fieldwork pioneer, Seligman depended, out of necessity, on colonial agents and missions for local knowledge and hospitality. A close reading of Seligman and his Torres Strait colleagues shows their reservations, and inaction, to those influences. Seligman's sensitivity to stigmatizing language was evident in his papers when he explained the use of the concept of Stone Age populations.[1] Seligman's ethnological studies of African races, for which he has been condemned, were conducted in the shadowy post-Darwinian between-wars era, before the rise of fascism demonstrated the appalling human cost of the hegemony of race. Seligman was both a perpetrator of racial cataloguing, and its victim as a Jew, but his ethnology does not reflect with his strong personal relationships with the people he researched. It is ironic that the transparent personal prejudices of his student, colleague and successor, Malinowski, have not yet led to this more distinguished anthropologist being erased.[2]

In 2016, I was at the LSE as a visiting scholar to begin research for this book. Postgraduate students attending the traditional Friday seminars sometimes asked about my research subject. They usually did not recognize the name Seligman, and laughed when I pointed out that we were sitting in the Seligman library under his portrait. This is the evidence of Seligman's foundational role in the institution that was later removed by the student-driven campaign against him. Seligman's name was removed from the library, along with his portrait, and the space was ceremonially renamed the Old Anthropology Library. The books remained. Throughout the world, many identities were erased during the resistance of the Black Lives Matter and Fallism[3] movements, when statues associated with colonialism and slavery were torn down or vandalized. Social stigmatizing of the Seligman legacy in the early twenty-first century is no more surprising, as a sociopolitical trend, than the content of Seligman's ethnological work: both reflect the mores of their era.

Born late in the nineteenth century, the Seligmans were products of both their epoch and the rapidly assimilating post-Victorian Anglo-Jewish culture. They started married life as irreligious, non-observant Jews and ended it sacrificing home, time, money and reputation to ameliorate the suffering of Jewish refugees from German fascism. The concept of Jewishness as a race rather than a religion or cultural identity was contested, perilous and deeply entrenched socially, and an inescapable, stigmatising reality for the Seligmans. It was a dilemma that they could not resolve. Their philanthropy was both a family tradition and a necessary resistance to anti-Semitism. Tolerance was rented in England by the largesse of the small, wealthy, old Jewish community to ensure the refugee populations

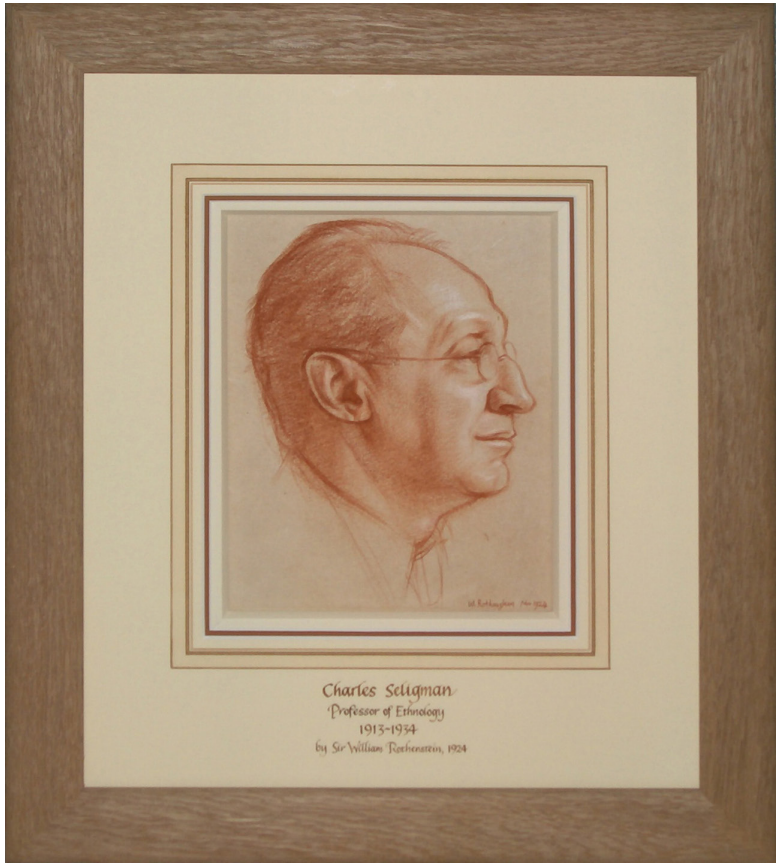

Figure 0.1. Charles Seligman by Sir William Rothenstein, 1924 (reframed 2009)

would not be a burden to society. Anti-Semitism in Europe was no more condemned than dreams of Empire, despite the injustice and cruelty associated with both. When Europe blundered into two world wars, the Seligmans' lives were as profoundly shattered as millions of others. Twelve weeks before he died in 1940, Seligman lamented having been born into such a time.

However, Seligman was born into material privilege. Trained in medicine, he specialized in pathology with a preference for research in tropical medicine. He was initially refused a place on the pioneering expedition to the Torres Strait in 1898, simply because the leader, A.C. Haddon, did not like the look of him. A small inheritance paid his way. Seligman used his work ethic and integrity to reverse first-impression prejudices. He experienced rejection even in a remote corner of the Empire where the powerful colonial agent had already expressed enough contempt to drive away an earlier Jewish visitor, Seligman's medical friend Charles Myers. Self-consciously abrupt in manner, Seligman had gentlemanly breeding that was only evident on close contact. He was neither egotistical nor competitive with colleagues, willing to work harder than most. The friendships he won in Oceania lasted his lifetime. Anthropology became his vocation after he led another expedition back to British New Guinea in 1903 to extend his research. He returned to England to work conscientiously at writing the reports with his old team to win recognition for anthropology at the LSE, and Cambridge and Oxford Universities.

Seligman preferred to be known as an ethnologist. He applied his knowledge of anatomy and physiology to build racial categories and map migration. He elected ethnology as his professorial title at the LSE. He dipped into other sciences, particularly early Freudian psychology, attempting to define a new anthropology that was no longer dominated by armchair experts working in university libraries.

Seligman was regarded as a marginal man until he married the feisty, red-headed heiress Brenda Salaman in 1905. Educated, driven and conscientious, she became his scribe and muse, working alongside him in Ceylon and the remote deserts of the Nilotic Sudan, learning Arabic, encountering lions and crocodiles, and talking her way into harems to study tribal women's ways. It was a partnership recognized and celebrated by Seligman's friends. Over thirty years, the couple wrote three dense descriptive tomes from surveys in British New Guinea, Ceylon and Africa. These were not theoretical studies, but surveys on every aspect of the people's languages, religion and culture. For decades, Seligman students carried the relevant fat book

back to the field to guide their own research. Colleagues said they could not separate the couple's contributions to co-authored work. Yet Brenda had a sociological perspective and Seligman was preoccupied with scientism. He did the ethnology: the physical anthropology, measuring skulls and bones from which he categorized race. The vibrant quality of her writing was evident from the start, when it transformed his recitations of dry data in their co-authored 180-page report on the Kababish Arab tribes, published by Harvard (B.Z. Seligman 1918).

I am a scholar of the sociology of work, religion and education, and Brenda Seligman piqued my curiosity when she appeared among the Jewish female domestic scholars I had studied. Most women had no place in universities at the beginning of the twentieth century, but none of them hid behind their husbands in the way that Brenda did. Almost a quarter of a century after his death, she styled herself 'Assistant to the Late Professor Seligman' and every act of benevolence promoted his reputation. Unlike her sisters and sisters-in-law, she was never a suffragette or feminist. During the last ten years of Seligman's life, when he suffered chronic disabling sickness, it was thought that Brenda did most of his work. Her reticence made it difficult to define that work, but her chatty letters kept arriving in his students' mail in remote places.

I have audaciously wandered into this small world of early anthropology because the 'sociology of the environment of social anthropologists has a bearing on the history of social anthropology' (Leach 1984: 3). It was the last period in which anthropologists diversified their field, venturing into botany, psychology, shellshock, eugenics, health and justice. The cavalcade of colleagues in this book, particularly those trained in medicine, shows how they reinvented their expertise and drew one another into new fields, with variable results. Malinowski, trained first in sociology, moved the next generation progeny out of scientism into contemporary application of research.

Brenda's mentor in social anthropology was the Cambridge psychologist W.H.R. Rivers, who was responsible for the worst experience of her life. Towards the end of the First World War, Brenda sought his counsel about some domestic anxieties. He sent her to Liverpool, by train, where she was met by another of her husband's medical colleagues who committed Brenda to an asylum for the insane. At the time, Seligman was working with his old Torres Strait colleagues as a clinical psychologist to shellshock patients. Brenda spent her life hiding the facts, never blaming anyone for the weeks

of horror she endured. Rivers' role in the lives of the Seligmans also began in the Torres Strait.

Two of Rivers' students, William McDougall and Charles Myers, signed on to the Cambridge Expedition early, but Rivers could not be persuaded to go. His last-minute change of mind made the seven-man team heavy with psychologists. The younger men were seduced by technology, and they carried innovative equipment to the islands for testing indigenes' senses. Rivers elected to stick with a pen-and-paper methodology known as the genealogical method, which provided comprehensive insights into Indigenous life, using oral transmission of familial histories. Seligman worked alongside him. After her marriage, Brenda studied the method with Rivers and used it on field expeditions. It was at the heart of most of her dozen academic monographs. She was among the few scholars who persisted with the method when kinship studies were derided. A few later commentators promoted the unpopular idea that kinship studies were the foundation of British social anthropology (Langham 1981).

During the First World War, Seligman was legally an enemy alien, and it was only the intervention of his old friends that ensured he got into the British Army uniform. He had learned some psychology with Rivers in the Torres Strait, and read Freud, and he was recruited along with the others to deal with the tragic presence of thousands of immobilized shellshocked soldiers in British asylums. Curiously, Seligman did not use his work in either war for publications, which may have reflected his insecurities as an enemy alien or a Jew. His archive of clinical notes on shellshock is an unmined treasury for other researchers.[4] The Second World War and the spectre of fascism brought different challenges. It is an enigma that while he worked against anti-Semitic racism in Britain in the 1930s, he was writing the Hamitic hypothesis, published in his discredited student handbook *Races of Africa* (Seligman 1957 [1930]).

The Seligmans were profoundly affected by the tragedy of their children, a son who was mentally disabled and a precocious daughter who died in childhood. After their daughter's death in 1920, they moved to a magnificent old rectory near Oxford, which for twenty years served as a heartland for students, colleagues and colonial administrators returning from remote outposts. Seligman worked part of the week in London, and Brenda propagated irises for her annual garden party and rode her horse to the hunt, until they returned to fieldwork and writing. Their home had a private museum

for his collections of primitive tools and weaponry, and her collection of ancient Chinese porcelain and art. Brenda loved to glean gossip about the academic world, which she shared in letters to students and lecturers in remote places. Seligman was apolitical and always a peacemaker.

Brenda regularly provided hospitality to Malinowski, who never had any money. When he gained the professorial seat in anthropology at the LSE, he even shared Seligman's office. A complex and turbulent man, Malinowski both loved and hated the Seligmans as he struggled for independence from them. Hundreds of letters between Seligman and Malinowski testify to a warm mentoring relationship, even when they were 10,000 miles apart. Ultimately, Malinowski grew closer intellectually to Brenda because they shared social perspectives on race, kin, and madness, focused on the function of cultural practices and institutions.

The Seligmans' contribution to institution building in England was hidden by a lifetime of *mitzvah*: the secret Jewish acts of obedience to scripture by helping others. Despite their agnosticism, they had both absorbed the Judaic values of community through self-denial and it was intrinsic to all they did, unconsciously reflecting the wider anxiety of Anglo-Jewry in the first half of the twentieth century. There was an upsurge of anti-Semitism with each new wave of Eastern European Jewish emigration, with fears of increasing crime brought about by poverty. The Seligmans regarded themselves as racially Jewish, although by 1911, many Jewish anthropologists, particularly in America, denied the existence of a distinctive Jewish type. Brenda's brother, Redcliffe Salaman, was one of the last scientists who tried to prove the reality of a Jewish race before the rise of Hitler. Both Seligman and Salaman had also been active eugenicists.

Perceptions of justice were not only clouded by colonial and Darwinian thought in that era, but anthropologists concerned about the erosion of cultures were also silenced by necessity. White men working in the colonies had translation skills and collections of data and artefacts; they were writers and anthropologists, and many had a paternalistic love for the people they served, albeit diluted by the rhetoric of civilizing them. This coterie was Seligman's first and most enduring academy, his research helpers and a vital source for his books and support for his students. Despite this disregard for justice issues, anthropological work was occasionally redemptive. Most significantly, the Cambridge reports on the Torres Strait Expedition were utilized in winning Native Title in Australia in 1982.

The Cambridge reports came to light in *Mabo v Queensland*, the decisive judgment that overturned Australia's oldest colonial myths. At the dawn of the twentieth century, Indigenous Australians were regarded as the most primitive people on earth in a Darwinian hierarchy rooted in Western definitions of civilization. Through the 1835 proclamation of the legal myth of *terra nullius* – no-man's land or wasteland – Australia and its islands became British sovereignty. In the 1970s, Eddie Mabo, a gardener at James Cook University in Far North Queensland, was surprised to learn he did not own ancestral land on his native Thursday Island. Mabo's decade-long campaign for land rights began on the campus and spread rapidly. He recalled family stories of white men who had yarned with his ancestors around the fires on Thursday Island, who had gone away to write books about their way of life. Finding those reports in the university library started his quest. The islanders' social practice called yarning had transmitted to their descendants an understanding of the islanders' place in the world. The Cambridge Expedition reports revealed a stable and developed society in the Torres Strait, with complex laws of the land that were ancient. Islanders knew the boundaries of land their clans had the right to cultivate. There were no fences, but they had legal pathways through the land of their neighbours. For generations they stewarded the sea and sky as their property and took responsibility for each other as owners and neighbours.

There was no redemption for Seligman's influence in Africa. His name was linked to the Hamitic hypothesis, a race theory that was convenient propaganda in the Rwandan genocide of 1994. His anthropometric evidence for race appeared in *Races of Africa* (Seligman 1957). Later evidence challenged the physical and linguistic basis, but the Hamitic concept that Seligman utilized was developed from bewildering Old Testament commentaries on the separation of black and white races through Noah's son, Ham. Seligman asserted the Hamites were a superior people of Caucasoid origin. Although Seligman tried to lead a scientific scramble out of racism between 1932 and 1940, when the use of race theory in anti-Semitism became clear, his efforts were thwarted by British anti-Semitism. He was rejected as not sufficiently objective to conduct anti-fascist research because he was a Jew. It is unlikely Seligman regretted the publication of his small book describing the races of Africa because it was reprinted regularly as a standard text. Forty years after his death, a large panel of his colleagues became complicit in the status of *Races of Africa* when they updated the 1979 edition.

The Seligman marriage was passionate and turbulent, intensified by their intellectual life. So many of the great ideas of the twentieth century swirled around them. Seligman was not an emotional man and he always felt unequal to the needs of Brenda's nature. She described herself as fierce. At their worst, the professor was distracted by wartime work in shellshock while his colleagues decided his wife was mad. At their best, she rescued him from manipulative collaborators and some errors, and protected him from belligerent opponents. When he was too crippled to set out on their last heroic journey to salvage culture – some might call it an Oriental looting expedition – she hired an ambulance to get him to a ship and used stretcher bearers in foreign cities. In every paper and book, she was at work with a blue pencil. As Seligman's health declined, Brenda's tenacity grew. As a widow, she did her greatest work as benefactor and mentor to help institutions and individuals serve posterity. She edited articles and books that would not otherwise have achieved publication. She used her wealth to create a reputation for Seligman, through bequests and scholarships, a library, and the deposit of thousands of artefacts, collections of jade, bronze and porcelain, and Chinese paintings to the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum. She made an agreement with the museums to ensure rare items were continuously displayed widely for ten years. Proceeds from the sale of one of a pair of precious Benin masks were used as a bequest of £20,000 to the Royal Anthropological Institute (RAI). Yet it was not a simple gift. Brenda devised a judicious ten-year plan for the financial survival of the RAI, using a contract to ensure the bequest was released incrementally to leverage other financial support. She occupied editorial boards and presided over committees. At the end of her life, her colleagues – her husband's former students – recognized her place among them and honoured her with a *festschrift*[5] – the ultimate gift of recognition for a scholar.

Notes

1. See footnotes to Seligman C.G. 1929 *Temperament, Conflict and Psychosis in a Stone-Age Population.*
2. Malinowski was willing to express thoughts that others would have kept hidden. The violence of his language towards the people he was researching was mentioned by Raymond Firth in his introduction to Malinowski's *Diary in the Strict Sense of the Word* (1989). However, Firth said Malinowski

was equally forthright in cursing Americans and Europeans who fuelled his frustration. The publication of the diary by Malinowski's widow was criticized because of the unrepressed emotions it contained. Although he sometimes expressed negative views on various groups of people, his encounters with them were often cordial.

3. Fallism began in South Africa in 2015, when a black student in Cape Town threw faeces at a bronze statue of imperialist Cecil Rhodes, leading to the Rhodes Must Fall movement. Black students emphasized the role of education in the continuing dehumanization and oppression of the subjects of colonization, through hegemonic teaching materials, subjects and language.
4. Seligman papers, LSE 10-1.
5. A collection of essays on kinship, edited by Schapera and Evans-Pritchard (1963).