**Doing Deep Big History: race, landscape and the civilisation of H J Fleure (1877-1969)**

**ABSTRACT**: This paper argues that current programmes in the human sciences which adopt a multi-disciplinary approach to history need to be wary of treating the knowledge of the natural sciences as itself independent of social influence. Such efforts to do ‘Big History, ‘Deep History’ or co/evolutionary history themselves have a past, and this paper suggests that potential practitioners could benefit from considering that historical context. To that end, it explores the career of Herbert John Fleure, a scholar whose career defied disciplinary classification, but who was concerned to understand how the human past and present could be understood as they combined in the physical and social context of their production, and what they implied for the possibility of a human future. It concludes by arguing that Fleure’s major lesson for modern researchers is his confrontation of the contingent nature and political consequences of his conclusions.

**KEYWORDS**: Evolution, Big History, Deep History, interdisciplinarity, H J Fleure, Wales

When it comes to considering the history of the human sciences, one key focus for future historians will probably be the ‘natural-sciences turn’ that became visible during the early 21st century. Although interest by students of the humanities in utilising the empirical knowledge of the natural sciences was relatively common in the period prior to the Second World War (Renwick, 2012), it was much more rarely seen in the post-war period. Even in areas where the sciences and the humanities shared a common research object – the environment, for example, or non-human animals (Worster, 1977; Thomas, 1983) – it was still very unusual to see humanities scholars deploying the work of natural scientists to support or to advance their own research agendas. As the century closed, however, this changed. A notable increase in attention to the epistemological, and sometimes the methodological, frameworks of the natural sciences came to characterise both the work of influential individual scholars and a number of emerging research programmes. These researchers were not just studying the activities of natural scientists – as in the case of, for example, science-studies scholars – but were actively trying to put the strategies and knowledge of the natural sciences to work. From around the turn of the millennium, key monographs (Cronon, 1995; McNeil & McNeil, 2003; Smail, 2007; Fuller, 2011), special issues of journals focusing on the shared interests and intersections between the human and the natural sciences began to appear with relative regularity (Shaw, 1999; Milbourne, 2003; Fay, 2003; Shaw, 2013; Brooke et. al, 2014). Histories and sociologies of the environment and animals were now joined by investigations of what became known as ‘Deep History’, ‘Big History’ and evolutionary history: increasingly, scholars wanted to know what biology could do for history. Perhaps notably, however, the concomitant question – what could history do for biology? – was more rarely asked.

Key political and intellectual events of the 20th century made such a ‘natural-science turn’ extremely surprising. In the 1950s, direct experience of the treatment meted out by the government of Nazi Germany to those it considered racially or medically inferior had made both the humanities and the natural sciences deeply wary of using biology to understand or explain culture and society (Stephans, 1982; Selcer, 2012): science, it was clear, should not be put to the service of politics. The attempts in the 1970s to establish bio-social rules that would apply to human and non-human society alike - Wilson’s *Sociobiology* (1975) and – sometimes – Dawkins’ *Selfish Gene* (1976) are usually singled out as the missiles that shattered already fragile bridges between the disciplines – prompted a vicious intellectual schism that still reverberates at the present day. Again, it was the political consequences of suggesting that economic and social divisons were biologically based that proved unacceptable (Segerstrale, 2001; Rees, 2009). By the 1990s, the ostensive focus had shifted from race to intelligence, with the appearance of Herrenstein and Murray’s *The Bell Curve*: again, however, the racial inflection was clear, and intense and vitriolic political and scientific debate ensued (Fraser et al, 1995; Devlin et al., 1997; Gorodin, 2014). But curiously, at the same time as many humanists continued to recoil from any attempt to use biology to understand social life[[1]](#footnote-1), others were eagerly grasping after recent developments within biological and ecological theory, citing them as a reason to, or a means of, establishing new and collaborative relationships within the academy.

Characteristic of programmes such as ‘Big History’, ‘Deep History’ and (co)evolutionary history is the adoption of a multi-disciplinary approach which combines the sciences with the humanities in order to provide an account of human experience that can begin with the Big Bang, and end with the Internet. Such efforts are not new – but perhaps precisely *because* of their inherently interdisciplinary nature, they are historically associated more with appeals to popular, rather than professional, audiences (Secord, 2000; Huxley, 1957; Bronowski, 1973). They have demonstrated their capacity to make a broad and abiding appeal to lay audiences, particularly in the context of the search for origin stories and the late 20th century vogue for popular science writings. The biological and evolutionary sciences are particularly important here, for obvious reasons, but linguistics, geology, anthropology, economics and cosmology – to name just a few – are frequently drawn upon by practitioners as they develop empirical investigations and theoretical frameworks that will enable them to conceptualise the longest possible ‘longue durée’ – and to present these to both their colleagues and the public. The danger here, of course, is that such approaches tend to presume that the knowledge of the natural sciences – unlike the humanities or social sciences – is itself independent of social, cultural, economic or political influence. In fact, it is often the presumed *absence* of such influence that gives these reports such appealing authority: their presumed objectivity permits their global, universal application. But to assume that science is culturally and intellectually innocent is to fall into the trap that science studies and the history of science have been flagging up since the early days of the Edinburgh school (Bloor, 1976; Gilbert and Mulkay, 1984; Shapin, 1994; Golinski, 2005). As these scholars, and many others, have shown, science is what scientists do, emerging out of their interactions with the natural and social world. The sciences have their own histories, as indeed does the notion of ‘objectivity’ itself. For this reason, this paper will argue that one major contribution that the history of science can make, both to the future *history* of the human sciences, and to these important, interdisciplinary and publicly influential projects *within* the human sciences, is to ground them in their own history.

For this reason, in this paper, I want to focus on a much earlier series of attempts to write what we might now call ‘Deep’ and ‘Big’ history, by one Herbert John Fleure (1877-1969), a now little-known scholar whose long career was nonetheless notable for significant and sustained contributions to public life and academic debate. He had a central role to play in the professional and methodological development of more than one discipline, and made a number of key interventions in broader intellectual and policy debates. He was, after all, a zoology graduate who was offered a job as lecturer in geology, botany and zoology, which he accepted only when he was promised that he would also be allowed to pursue his interests in anthropology and geography (Garnett, 1970). Fleure exerted a tremendous influence on British education in general (Freeman, 1987), and was, and is, cited as one of the makers of modern geography (Stoddart, 1986; Garnett, 1970). He had a key role to play in the broader debate on race in the UK in the pre-and inter-war years (Winlow, 2001), and his significance here is especially important when it is remembered that he wrote for both an academic and a popular audience. He managed to appeal to, and to influence, anthropologists and politicians on both right and left of the politics of race: in 1935, he was the chair of the committee set up by the Royal Anthropological Institute and the Institute of Sociology in London to investigate the ‘racial factor’ in culture, and managed to be quoted with approval by both progressive liberals and characters like George Pitt-Rivers (Kushner, 2008)[[2]](#footnote-2). Later in this paper, I will outline Fleure’s various Presidencies and honours: for now, it is sufficient to note that his public influence was exerted not least by means of the small, reasonably priced books (often reaching more than one edition) that he wrote for a range of different publishers from 1918 until 1951. He worked closely with biologists and sociologists – and individuals who were both, such as Patrick Geddes (Renwick, 2009) – who helped him explore the significance of ‘region’ to his understanding of human history, and to use this as means of managing the relationships between rural and urban, tradition and modernity in both his public and professional life (Gruffudd, 1994).

But despite the centrality of the concept of region to his work, Fleure’s career, and his efforts to put forward a coherent human story, were dominated by his explorations of the practical and philosophical applications of the concept of race. From his earliest publications, he completely rejected the notions of both racial hierarchies and racial types: the latter, as this paper will show, was, for him, an artefact of scientific methodology, while the former had no grounding in empirical reality. Throughout his life and in his work, Fleure exhilarated in the exploration of strength through diversity, grounded in the mutual recognition of common humanity. He was a founding member of both the International Club of Manchester and the Manchester Coordinating Council for Refugees and Aliens (Kushner, 2008), and was active throughout his life in fostering and promoting international contact and humanitarian projects.[[3]](#footnote-3) Throughout his career, he rejected deterministic linkages between race and culture, and fought to show that any understanding of race could only emerge from the examination of individual difference, rather than by fitting individuals to a pre-determined racial type. He produced excoriating criticism of the use of ‘race’ in public debate – it was used, he said, mostly by ‘demagogues to stir up evil passions’ (Fleure, 1940). But the fact that he retained his focus on race until the end of his long and active life probably goes a considerable way toward explaining why his legacy is now largely forgotten.

This paper will explore the way that Fleure understood and used the concepts of race, landscape and civilisation in his exploration of how the global pre/history of humanity could be understood in relation to the present day. Although a number of contemporary scientists were also writing accounts of human evolution and the distant past that straddled disciplinary boundaries (Rees, 2016), Fleure’s work is distinctive in its orientation to the future, especially with regard to Britain’s international and local politics. This paper will investigate his focus on the importance of understanding humanity in ecological as well as evolutionary context, his analysis of the relationship between the past, present and future, as well as his stress on the importance of community, region and governance. It will conclude by considering the implications of Fleure’s early 20th century approach for modern workings of Deep Big History – with particular attention to the way in which Fleure situated his science within a social and cultural context, as well as his conscious reflection on the fact that his research both could, and *should,* have political implications. To begin, however, since Fleure is now a relatively little-known figure, it will probably be useful to outline his own origins, as well as to detail the influences he was able to exert over Britain’s intellectual landscape.

*Who was Fleure?*

Fleure was born on the Channel Island of Gurnsey in 1877. Blind in one eye, he spent his early years as an invalid, often unable to attend school but reading voraciously and widely and – when health permitted, taking long walks that gave him an intimate knowledge of the flora and fauna, human and non-human, of the island. It was to these early experiences that Fleure later attributed his life-long fascination with understanding human culture in its physical and historical context (Marren, 1995; Garnett, 1970). Financial constraints and on-going ill-health made the University College of Wales at Aberystwyth one of the few places in which he could hope to pursue an academic career, and in 1897 he won a scholarship to read in zoology, geology and botany there. In 1901, he graduated with a first class BSc. in zoology, and after a short period in Zurich, returned to Aberystwyth as Assistant Lecturer in 1904. By 1910 – the year in which he was appointed as Lecturer in Geography – he had already spent time as Head of both the departments of Zoology and Geology. He maintained his role as Head of Zoology until his appointment in 1917 as the first holder of the Gregynog Chair in Anthropology and Geography at the university. In 1930, he accepted the offer of another newly-created Chair in Geography at the Victoria University of Manchester, where he remained until his retirement from formal university life in 1944. Relocating to London, Fleure persisted with active intellectual engagements – he continued to publish in anthropological and geographical journals, lectured on issues pertaining to the nature of British civilisation, and made contributions to debates in prehistory, eugenics and folklore studies as well as playing a key role in the establishment of the national survey of blood group distribution. Appointed as Fellow of the Royal Society in 1936, he had already served as Presidents of Sections H (1926) and E (1932) of the British Association, and following his retirement from Manchester, he went on to preside over the Royal Anthropological Institute, the Folklore Society and the Geographical Association, as well as the ‘Corresponding Societies’ section of the BA.[[4]](#footnote-4) He remained actively engaged on his blood group work and his wider projects until well into his ninth decade (Fleure, 1962; Fleure & Davies 1958; Anon, 1951).

The range of official positions held by Fleure accurately reflects the multifaceted nature of his intellectual life, as evidenced from his very earliest to his last publications. These ranged from short zoological and botanical reports to a series of notes on improving the fisheries around the Aberystwyth area, through discussions of Celtic myth and legend (Fleure 1904a, 1904b, 1905, 1910, 1913; Fleure & James, 1907; Fleure et al., 1911). All these appeared during the period when – apart from leading not one, but two, academic departments – he was also engaged in establishing the Anthropological Survey of Wales and developing his conceptions of how geography, in particular human geography, should be established and taught in British schools and universities. His first book, *Human Geography in Western Europe*, appeared in 1918 as part of the *Making of the Future* series edited by Patrick Geddes and Victor Branford, and was widely reviewed, being noticed by journals such as the *Christian Science Monitor* and the *American Geographical Review* as well as local and national newspapers and magazines[[5]](#footnote-5). Havelock Ellis’ extensive exploration of the volume in *The Nation* praised Fleure’s capacity to avoid geographical determinism while still managing to tie his understanding of present day populations to their prehistoric past through the physical spaces they inhabit(ed) (Ellis 1918)[[6]](#footnote-6). The *New Statesman* agreed, as did the *Journal of Education*, which stressed that Fleure’s key focus was on the evolving relationship between ‘man’ and the environment: while not determining character, geographical context was essential to the understanding of social life. The *Positivist Review* praised the book series as a whole and Fleure’s contribution in particular for, ‘even in the imperfect state of sociological science’, still managing to draw ‘inspiration from the poets and artists as well as from the philosophers and men of science’ (Desch, 1918: 152-3). Many more books and articles followed (Fleure 1922a, 1923, 1935, 1942).[[7]](#footnote-7) Each of these reflect different facets of Fleure’s abiding fascination with understanding human social life as expressed in relationship with both prehistory and geography, and his efforts to investigate this by drawing on subjects and disciplines that ranged from physical anthropology to zoology, taking in geology, history, folklore and industrial relations along the way.

Both Fleure’s approach, and the national recognition he had won by adopting it, are best illustrated by one of his last substantive works – his contribution to the immensely influential *New Naturalist* series (Fleure, 1951; Marren, 1995). The series, which began publication in 1945, was intended to awaken the general reader to the quiet glory of the natural history of Britain, by creating a synthesis of British ecology that would reawaken public interest in, and passion for, the natural world in the post-war period of planned urban industrialism. In the hope of combating the ‘degradation and destruction which may result equally from unplanned development as from wrongly conceived physical planning’ (Stamp et al, 1951: xv), the Editorial Board, which included Julian Huxley, Dudley Stamp, James Fisher and John Gilmour, tried to make the deep-seated connection between the future mental and physical health of humanity and the environment – at both the individual and the social level – pellucidly clear. Fleure, they decided, was the scholar best placed to contribute a volume on human ecology to the series, one that would show ‘man’ as one (important) element among many in understanding the natural world. The result – *A Natural History of Man in Britain: Conceived as a Study of Changing Relations between Men and Environments* – represented the distillation of Fleure’s lifetime of work. Beginning in the Palaeolithic, the account stresses the centrality of diversity, adaptation and migration to the understanding of human origins in general and within the British Isles in particular. Dealing with agriculture, industry, housing, architecture, fashion, transport and religion, Fleure details the prehistory, history, sociology, politics and economics of British life, illustrating his analysis with pictures of modern welsh coracles, morris dancers, Charles Darwin as a modern exemplar of the likely physiognomy of the Beaker Folk, and a photograph of the house of a man who was said to have married a fairy.

His depiction of human life began deep in the pre-human past and – not least through his focus on the significance of ‘regions’ – stretched out to encompass the globe. It took stories as seriously as statistics as sources of evidence, and it considered cooperation to be as significant as competition when it came to accounting for biological and social evolution. It concluded by looking forward to the way in which the ‘Social Service State’ would act to ameliorate the impact of the Industrial Revolution on the habits and minds of a species oriented to small group living. At the same time, he called for ‘personality and initiative [to be] cherished as the fountain of originality and the only means of keeping social life and thought from mechanised direction by authoritarian doctrine’ (Fleure, 1951: 331): state control was always to be balanced against the freedom of the individual. As this paper will show, Fleure eschewed determinism, whether social, geographic, political or biological: his strategy for understanding the human past, present and future was always on the *interplay* of different factors within a particular *context*.

*Understanding the present in the past and the past in the present*

In both teaching and research, Fleure’s fundamental methodological approach was not just to use the past to understand the present, but at the same time to use the present to understand the past. While at Aberystwyth, for example, he taught courses that were notably wide-ranging and interdisciplinary in their intellectual remit, but which took a broadly chronological – or at least developmental – approach, usually beginning in prehistory and concluding at the present. ‘Ancient Lands’, for example, began with Ur of the Chaldees and ended – twenty one lectures later – with the role and remit of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company[[8]](#footnote-8). ‘Races’ was introduced with a discussion of the skin and its associated organs as a means of mediating the relationships between internal and external events in birds and mammals and took sixty-six lectures to arrive at the physical anthropology of modern Spain and Italy, taking his audience from prehistoric Europe to Africa, the Middle East, India, North East Asia, and the Americas before returning to contemporary Europe. ‘Simple Societies’ began with his interpretation of the pre-human emergence of society, continued with his analysis of the ecological context of different modes of economic production before concluding with a geo-historical comparison of the emergence of cities in the Eastern Mediterranean, the Paris basin and in Central Europe[[9]](#footnote-9). Despite their different focus, each lecture series insisted on understanding social and biological phenomena as historical products that emerged in interaction with each other over time. These phenomena, for Fleure, were influenced, but not determined by, their immediate environmental context, a context which was itself evolving in interaction with human activities.

However, at the same time, Fleure was also arguing that the bodies and minds of present-day populations provided important insights into the behaviour and experiences of the people of the past. On one level, as with E B Tylor’s doctrine of survivals, this simply meant taking folklore seriously (Wheeler-Barclay, 2010; Hodgen, 1931). In 1923, for example, he used Henrich Schliemann’s use of Homeric legends to identify the original site of the city of Troy to make the point that similar kernels of truth might rest in British legends. Geoffrey of Monmouth and the Mabinogion, he argued, both deserved to be studied by paleographical specialists and to be treated as potential sources of significant prehistoric information. Similarly, in his 1947 Frazer Memorial Lecture, he argued that the Welsh legend of Cantre’r Gwaelod (‘the Lowland Hundred’) might represent a survival to modern times of memories of geologic submergence related to glacial melt.[[10]](#footnote-10) In the same lecture, he wondered whether the legendary ‘fairies or moorland folk to whom iron was taboo but who were skilled in herbal medicines’ (1948: 15) might actually describe the Neolithic or Bronze Age inhabitants of Britain, physically displaced by Iron Age invaders, but very much still present in the modern imagination. But Fleure was not just interested in symbolic survivals: a key element of his approach to understanding the ecological, biological and social aspects of human evolution was based on his belief that physical characters could persist largely unchanged over time. Their continued expression in particular geographical and social locations could, he argued, be used to explain how both prehistoric population movements and the ways in which early humans had oriented towards and used the landscape. This was shown clearly in the methodological strategy he adopted for one of his most important intellectual contributions – his establishment of the Anthropological Survey of Wales.

*Concentrated essences of locality?*

Fleure began this survey in 1905, shortly after his return to Aberystwyth (James & Fleure, 1907). Originally planned in the closing years of the previous century, this combination of anthropometry, genealogy and local history was intended to ‘study the process of evolution as working itself out in mankind, physically, socially and intellectually’ (Fleure & Davies, 1958: 45; Urry, 1984). Previous anthropometric efforts to understand human evolution had, Fleure argued, been flawed: archaeologists had, he said, based their assertions on too small a sample, while the tendency of anthropologists to agglomerate measurements into overall averages had actually hidden the existence of distinct types within populations (Fleure & James, (1916). Averaging had, he suggested, also encouraged people to think of characters becoming ‘blended’ through inheritance as a result of an insufficiently careful definition of types. In his mid-Wales location, Fleure realised that he had an unusual anthropometric opportunity. Cardiganshire, the place where the survey began, had been ‘comparatively little affected by modern movements of people’, meaning that it was possible to ‘find persisting in various parts types of mankind whose distinctions are not transient or accidental, but rather date from a very remote past’ (1916: 41). Seizing then the opportunity record this data before the railways and the Board of Education destroyed it, Fleure and his colleagues ‘decided to measure anyone and everyone who was of purely Welsh descent, so far as known, to concentrate upon the simple folk, as the more leisured classes of nearly everywhere are of very mixed descent, and especially to avoid any tendency to select individuals’ (1916: 41). That is to say, the Survey would *not* seek out predefined or predetermined ‘Celtic’, ‘Danish’ or ‘Saxon’ physical types. Instead, they would record physical measurements and genealogical data *as they occurred,* and in relation to their geographical location [illustration 1: the survey, organised according to county].

This was absolutely crucial to Fleure’s intellectual aims. He wanted to be able to identify individual physical characters – colouring, shape, size, capacity – as they occurred naturally, to see which characters tended to cluster physiognomically and socially, and to situate those clusters within particular local histories and geographies. With this aim and the help of various assistants, he did not just record the cranial and somatic measurements recommended by the Anthropometric Committee of the British Association (James & Fleure, 1907), but also the family history of the individual (illustration 2: Fleure’s card). The geographical origins of the individual’s maternal and paternal lines were noted alongside physical characteristics, which meant that individuals, characters and places could be considered and analysed independently. In order to conduct this analysis, Fleure had to find a way of handling this mass of data – and, given his interest in localities, it seemed appropriate to him to do this cartographically [illustration 3: map of Cardiganshire] (Livingstone, 1991). To do so, he developed a means of mapping individuals typographically, where particular combinations of letters, styles and notations would represent the existence in that specific place of an individual with a given cephalic index, nasal shape, or colouring. What this meant was that characters could be studied as they occurred in relation to their physical location: once ‘nests’ of characters had been identified, this could be tied back to individuals and family histories. In their presentation of the results of the first iteration of the Survey, Fleure argued that they had managed to identify ‘old-established and almost untouched populations’, where individuals lived in much the same place as had their grandparents, meaning that the ‘individuals described for a locality will likely be, as it were, concentrated essences of that locality’ (1916: 42).

Various iterations of this survey ran from 1905 until the late 1950s, supplemented by forays into the Welsh Marches and points east and south, together with the consideration of work done by others in Scotland and the European mainland (Fleure & Davies, 1958)[[11]](#footnote-11). What Fleure concluded, as a result of his anthropometric surveys, was that rather than being divided into ‘Anglo-Saxons’ or ‘Celts’, the British population was fundamentally characterised by a dark, long-headed and (relatively) short individual, probably representing the earliest groups of immigrants known to archaeology and anthropology through Neolithic material culture (Fleure & James, 1916: 113). There were a few caveats, however: perhaps most notably, Fleure’s identification of an especially unusual combination of characteristics that was very closely tied to a particular place – the moorlands of Plynlymon. This area of Wales was, he found, ‘a nest of extreme dolichocephaly, which usually goes with dark colouring’, along with a prominent glabella and occiput (61). Fleure was keen to emphasise that this character combination could also be identified in earlier anthropological surveys – John Beddoe’s photographs, for example, showed individuals that not only displayed them, but were from the same geographical location. But he went further still, arguing that this moorland ‘nest’ represented the intermingling of the standard dark long-head ‘with survivors of some older type. The strong development of the glabella and the low receding forehead suggest in a way’, he concluded, ‘the Neanderthaloid type’ (62). Stopping short of suggesting that here in the hills of Wales could be found Neanderthal survivors, he was absolutely clear that this Plynlymon variety was very ancient, possibly dating back to the Palaeolithic period. Later work on ‘Plynlymon man’, together with a close comparison of the measurement of the living with the prehistoric skulls excavated from Combe Capelle and elsewhere, led Fleure to conclude that similar survivals of characteristics of ‘high antiquity’ could be found in remote spots all around the fringes of Eurasia, representing a combination that was therefore widely distributed amongst the immediate post-glacial population of the continent (Fleure, 1920: 38).

*Cultural anthro-geography: examining landscape and race*

Crucially, however, Fleure’s argument here and elsewhere was not only based on anthropometry, but also on his analysis of the human use of the land and sea-scape. Pre – iron age humanity, he suggested, ‘was ill-equipped to cope with the wolf-haunted woodlands and the ague –infested swamp, and was thus restricted to the uplands for his settlements’ (1916: 71). Geography encouraged occupation of the high moorlands, while climate and geology (in the form of the distribution of stone suitable for toolmaking in Wales) made the far-western areas more attractive places for habituation. As a result, ‘the uplands near the coast of Wales were … far more favourable locations for, let us say, Stone Age man, than were those further inland’ (72). For Fleure, then, a combination of factors led him to conclude that these ‘ancient nests’ represented the persistence of types in ‘their early and natural locations’ (73), rather than populations driven into the mountains by invaders. Similar exercises of the anthro-geographic imagination enabled Fleure and his colleagues to map out the routes taken by these incoming Neolithic and Bronze Age migrants, again resisting the use of modern racial categories. While remaining focused on Britain’s west coast, he identified particular sub-types – in particular, ‘dark, stalwart, broad-headed men’, found in ‘certain costal patches, often curiously associated with megaliths’ (137). This pattern of physical and cultural distribution, he argued, had been found by other observers on the French and Iberian, as well as the Irish coasts, and represented evidence for ‘a coastal series of settlements … stretching at least from South Italy to Ireland’ (138). This, he suggested, was one key route of (probable) economic migration and trade from the Mediterranean to Britain, a process that he compared to the activities of the ‘Portuguese, Dutch, French and British … in the 17th and 18th centuries on the coasts of Africa and southern Asia’ (1948: 7). The region of the ‘maritime westerners’ existed, for Fleure, in contrast to both the antiquity of the moorlands and the immigrations of the ‘Beaker-makers’ from the Northern European plain: different peoples sought out different landscapes for different purposes.

But the one thing that had no evidential basis in the prehistoric past, according to Fleure, was the present day understanding of, and assumptions about, race and prehistory. One of his most explicit published statements in this context can be found in his 1923 survey of racial science in England and Wales. Taking it as read that the way to study race history is to study skeletal factors, alongside (for the living) the colour and shape of eyes, noses, ears, hair and skin, Fleure argued that most Britons were ‘mosaics of inheritance from our varied ancestry’ (1923: 16), with some characters appearing to ‘blend’ as they are handed on, others to retain their distinction. As a result, he pointed out that when speaking of ‘race-types’, one was not ‘thinking of breeds which have been kept separate since they evolved in the far-distant past. We are really thinking of groups of associated characters, which are frequently handed in one lot together from one generation to another’ (17-18). In practical terms, what this meant was that the ‘reader [should] at once be put on his guard against the common political statements about the Latin race, Teutonic race, Anglo-Saxon race, Celtic race and the like’: these were terms which, for Fleure, could certainly be applied to civilisations, but which became ‘fatally misleading’ if they were held to have any biological basis (18-9). Thirty years later, Fleure reiterated his earlier rejection of any clear relationship between culture and biology: the ‘groups speaking one and the same language are nevertheless not of one breed’ (Fleure & Davies, 1958), and there is no clear-cut association between any given ‘breed’ and a particular type of culture. English and Welsh people might consider themselves physically, linguistically and culturally distinct, but Fleure’s anthropometric survey demonstrated that the ubiquitous dark Neolithic long-head was the foundation stock for both populations. The real difference, understood both physically and politically, lay in the proportional balance between the different elements of the population – and this balance of differences was far more closely related to geographic region and social context than to nationality or ‘race’ as it was (then) politically understood (Fleure, 1922b).

Instead of race, it was regions, and the communities that populated their landscapes, that were central to Fleure’s understanding of the human past, present and future. Early in his career, he had begun his involvement with both the Committee for the Development of the Regional Survey and the Housing and Town Planning Institute. His position here was made clear in an address to the latter, given in 1918, and seconded by Professor Patrick Abercrombie. Here, he argued that the town represented the spiritual as well as the physical focus of a district, a point that planners needed to keep well in mind. He advised them to ‘cultivate the master light of memories and traditions, the deep institutions of life … by encouraging direct observation and study of the surroundings in which they lived’ (1918b: 56). Towns needed to consider not just the shopkeeper, but those in the surrounding areas who produced their goods: allotments and civic woodlands deserved the same thought that was given to garden suburbs. Planning should not, he argued fervently, be just about avoiding overcrowding, but about encouraging social cohesion and cooperation. Most importantly, decisions made at the national level must be based on empirical experience and information from the regions if society was to progress scientifically. One of his examples here focused on the need to redevelop the ribbon slums of the South Wales valleys – and emphasised the dangers inherent in permitting socially uniform communities to establish themselves. Managers who chose to live at a distance from their workforce should not, he suggested, be surprised when industrial relations became unmanageable. An unpublished essay ‘On Tolerance’, written in the aftermath of the Second World War, made the same points at the level of the community, rather than the street: the significance of both recognising and supporting the ‘common interest’ that held a diversity of individuals and a disparity of positions together was essential.[[12]](#footnote-12) Industrial societies, he argued, had to not just tolerate, but encourage discussion, debate and initiative among all members if they were to survive. The trouble was, from his perspective, that it was too easy for those who wished to study society scientifically to ignore such qualitative investigations and approaches in favour of statistical surveys. Such surveys were then translated into national regulations that often either didn’t fit or actively disrupted previously-successful local (regional) arrangements – and most worryingly, for Fleure, encouraged professionals and industrialists to regard themselves as patrons, rather than members, of the human communities on which their profits depended.

*Individuals, communities and the biology of history*

Fleure’s understanding of human social evolution, outlined most clearly in another unpublished essay, reflected this commitment to understanding the significance of community. In this essay, ‘The Biological Aspect of History’, an explicit effort to develop a ‘science of history’, Fleure criticised biologists for their failure to include alongside their analyses of the physical appearance and history of *Homo sapiens* a coherent account of human social and cultural development.[[13]](#footnote-13) While retaining a focus on the individual, and remaining very concerned to emphasise the importance of individual personalities and histories, Fleure tried to classify categories of, and motives for, human interaction as a means of understanding social evolution. He distinguished between habits of self-regard, family-regard, community-regard and humanity regard, arguing that while their emergence could, to a degree, be linked to increasing complexity at the level of both individual and society, they still needed to be understood as expressed by individuals in particular cultural and ecological contexts. In this sense, while the habit of ‘self-regard’ might initially be expressed through the quest for food and safety, it could equally well be satisfied through the satisfaction felt by the achievement of a reputation for improving community life. The habit of family-regard he identified as emerging with the appearance of parental – or, more specifically, maternal – care, which in turn he linked to the emergence of symbolic communication and key markers in the emergence of ‘civilisation’. The expansion of maternity into motherhood, he argued in another unpublished essay (‘Thoughts on Human Evolution’) was both a key aspect of ‘humanization’ and a driver behind the development of cookery, clothing, agriculture and pottery.[[14]](#footnote-14)

At the same time, however, care for close family relations posed dangers for the wider community: Fleure was fond of quoting a ‘very experienced and thoughtful as well as highly placed lady … for her diagnosis of the General Strike. She said, wisely [he] thought, that it resulted largely from the attempt to run industry under the grandsons of able men’ (‘On Tolerance’). While Fleure never argued for the redistribution of wealth, he was deeply uneasy with the fact that ‘our customs concerning property and inheritance make it dangerously possible for descendants to survive because of an ancestor’s fitness, rather than through their own’ (*‘*The Biological Aspect of History’). Consistently calling for the responsibilities of proprietorship to be recognised, Fleure’s account of the scope and shape of the ‘community-regarding’ habit also reflected his sense of the evolutionary and ecological significance of cooperation. Citing the example of Siphonophore colonies[[15]](#footnote-15) to illustrate the perils of over-specialisation or loss of individuality, he pointed to the development of systems of formal and informal education as a means of supporting personal and community development. For each of his classes of ‘habit’, Fleure identified a series of checks and balances – individual selfishness was mitigated by the emergence of communal expectations which were in turn muted by familial inheritance. No one aspect of human life –whether social, biological or geological – dominated or determined human history, but all needed to be considered in order to account for human experiences.

Fleure’s fourth category of human action – the ‘humanity-regarding’ habit – was where he placed some, although not all, religious activity. But he primarily saw this ‘habit’ as the capacity for communities to recognise their own capacity to cooperate with each other – and for individuals to ‘devote their intellect to increasing the stock of humanity’s knowledge’ (‘Biological Aspect of History’), supporting their own state by cooperating across international boundaries. For Fleure, it was these relationships between communities that were of most interest and relevance for the future, to the point where he, in all seriousness, suggested that *socialis* would be a better generic name for humanity than *sapiens*. Knowledge, he argued, was inherently social in both origin and storage: ‘developed’ races were so, not because their individual capacity for learning was greater, but because their common stock of knowledge was larger and had been derived from a wider range of different communities.

What’s interesting here is that while – as with his teaching – his analysis adopts a developmental framework, beginning with primitive primates and ending with the geopolitics of modern industrial relations, it is not developmentally oriented. There is no sense of progression from an earlier state of ‘self-regard’ to a ‘higher’ state of ‘community-regard’. His description is clearly intended to apply to all anatomically modern humans, but crucially, his expectation is that the expression of these motives/habits will depend on the socio-politico-ecological environment inhabited by the individual. So, for example, in a piece written for broadcast, he was explicit: people

‘are not all climbing the same ladder, and the kind of life we live in England … wouldn’t suit the circumstances of [other] lands’: as a result, ‘we should not speak of superior and inferior kinds of people. We try to understand that different people are suited in different circumstances… and deeper down that all our differences is our common humanity with immense possibilities of learning from each other’ (‘Racial and Social Diversity’)[[16]](#footnote-16)

In another example, his account of the ‘community regarding’ habit clearly reflects his notion of mature morality, but is expressed though his empirical exploration of how the proprietorial class should relate to the managerial, and how both should orient to the working class. Of course, in many ways this also reflects Fleure’s own Liberal nonconformism, emphasising the necessity of treating workers as part of the community at the same time as arguing against governmental restrictions on industry. But while he supported the full extension of the suffrage, he was not an unqualified proponent of laissez faire: equal political rights for workers would, he believed, have to develop into equal social opportunities, which might well necessitate ‘a new kind of state interference in industrial matters’ – such as that represented by the growing powers of the Home Office and the then Board of Trade. But essentially, for Fleure, ‘progress’, whether economic, political or moral, was the result of individuals finding more productive ways to cooperate, learning to act with mutual respect despite the recognition of different or divergent interests, and thus to compete more effectively with other groups.

*Conclusion*

Fleure opened his essay on *The Study of Man and the Welfare of Society* by arguing that the proper focus of the anthropologist-geographer was

‘the study of mankind physically, spiritually and socially in the hope that we may understand more fully the evolution of our bodies, minds and social organisations, and the transmission of ideas and equipment from one region and people to another with and without concomitant movements of peoples’.[[17]](#footnote-17)

To this end, he devoted his career, emphasising the importance of putting the present in the context of the past and understanding the past by analysing the present, and always with one eye to the consequences for the human future. In his account, the study of human bio-social evolution was inseparable from the analysis of the landscape within which different groups of humans were located, an ecology that was itself evolving as a result of the actions of its inhabitants. His methods for so doing relied on memory and measurement, on statistics and stories, and on treating geology as the foundation for both industrial relations and town planning. This was his vision of what human geography could do: pull together the methodologies, practices and concepts of the human and the natural sciences in order to create a scholarship of the humane (Anon, 1969; Anon, 1910).

His influence over the British intellectual landscape during his lifetime was significant. He was cited alongside Huxley, Fisher, Bernal and Eddington as a public intellectual, an acknowledged authority on race, on human prehistory and on the role of science in society. He played an essential role in establishing the remit of human geography as a field, as well as positioning geography as a key part of the curricula of British schools and universities. Additionally, he drove the importance of geography home to the British public: in 1920, *The Times* used quotes from his speech to the Geographical Association to advertise *The Times Survey Atlas of the World*, arguing that those without time to study Professor Fleure’s subject in depth could at least possess the book (Anon, 1920; Russell, 1948). He saw communicating with the public as integral to intellectual life: giving public lectures at the international, national and local level, as happy to speak through the British Academy and the Royal Institution as he was to talk to local history groups and organise programmes of school broadcasting for the BBC. His popularity and eminence can be seen from the way in in which his name was also used to advertise both *Harmondsworth’s Universal History*, which told the ‘enthralling story of human progress’ in fortnightly parts, (Anon, 1927) and the new *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1930).

Notably lacking from his career – despite, or perhaps because of, his keen awareness of the political consequences of his intellectual researches – were any abiding controversies. He was an extremely active committee-man, an enthusiastic member of the British Association, willing to lend his time and energies to Royal Commissions (on surveying the geographical distributions of British industry, or proposed locations for National Parks), to proposals to form a new Institute to study the social relations of science (Anon, 1938), to participation in the League of Nations Union and many other public efforts. In all of this, he showed a cooperative and collective spirit, managing to meditate between very different intellectual and political approaches. The closest he seems to have come to a public dispute was an exchange in the *Times* with J D Bernal, where he politely but very firmly disagreed with the latter’s scheme to establish a central clearing house for all scientific papers, on the grounds that it might ‘too easily lead to a political domination of scientific thought’ (Fleure, 1948b). Fleure’s approach was collaborative, not competitive.

For two reasons, this is unsurprising. First, throughout his career, Fleure, above all, wanted to learn and teach. His obituary – and his students – paid tribute to the fact that ‘it was as a teacher in the true sense of the term … that he was at his best’, presenting his students with problems to solve, not answers to remember (Anon, 1969). His public lectures, his support for the University Extra-Mural Movement, his work with local scientific societies and rural reading groups all put into practice his firm belief that ‘in the end, it was teaching that made a university’ (Anon, 1929). For him, pedagogy was not a duty to be fitted in around research, but utterly integral to his intellectual passions. As such, he saw himself as engaged in dialogue, rather than diatribe. Secondly, equally important to his world-view was the maintenance of diversity, whether intellectual or biological. His account – or fears for – the future would be familiar to anyone steeped in the recent arguments put forward by evolutionary psychologists and others: humanity, he worried, evolved to deal with small social groups, would find it hard to cope with industrial urban life. But his response, rather than seeing humanity as forever mentally frozen in the hunter-gatherer mindset, was to consider how the nature of interaction might evolve once exposed to a new environmental niche: rather than being the problem, civilisation (in the form of civil society) would eventually provide the solution. The future of humanity was not determined by its biological inheritance: as the cultural and physical context changed, so would human adaptations. Governments, whether at the level of the city or the nation state, had the capacity to provide guidance – but crucially, in order to do so successfully, would have to recognise and support diversity. This applied also, incidentally, to the physical make-up of the population: a wise government, Fleure argued, would encourage racial, as well as cultural diversity in order to maximise national resilience and responsiveness in the face of future economic or physical disaster.

In many ways, this is what makes Fleure’s work so interesting, and so potentially useful for our understanding of modern Deep, or Big, or evolutionary history: his constant orientation to the future encourages him to be explicit about the immediate political implications of his research, whether at the level of Welsh local government or in relation to global geopolitics. Fleure never felt his science could, or should, be separated from his political judgements: the one is allowed explicitly to inform the other in a manner that is evident to his readers. Modern researchers seeking to develop universal, or universalising, histories would certainly agree with Fleure’s dedication to pursuing knowledge that would provide active, practical benefits to community, nation and humanity, and would also probably applaud his awareness of his limitations. It is less clear, however, if they would accept as a principle Fleure’s acknowledgement that his work, whether done on the geographical distribution of plankton or the cranial capacity of prehistoric skulls, has immediate political – and sometimes overtly ideological – implications, which themselves influence the framing of research programmes. But it would probably be a major step forward for interdisciplinary research – especially work that straddles the natural/human sciences divide – if this was to be the case.

Throughout his career, Fleure both conducted and called for cross-disciplinary work, organising meetings and discussions where scholars from different disciplinary and national backgrounds could discuss terminology and methodology alongside ethics and social justice, and where the human sciences were given equal weight with the natural sciences. While this resembles some of the interdisciplinary workshop/programmes organised by and with historians such as Daniel Lord Smail (Shyrock & Smail, 2011), it contrasts sharply with the altogether more humanities-hostile approach associated with Steven Pinker and others (Slingerland & Collard, 2012). Equally, Fleure’s careful chairing of the joint committee on defining race contrasts sharply with the enthusiastic – and sometimes incautious – reception given by some social scientists to the concept of epigenetics (Meloni et al, 2016). But in many ways, what sets Fleure apart from other scholars is his deep awareness of the political context in which he worked. It was a basic principle of his research that humanity could not be understood other than in interaction with its environment – and neither could scholarship. Modern day practitioners of deep big history would do well to emulate Fleure’s modest reflexivity, and to remember that the sciences themselves have their histories.

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1. See, for example, the reactions to Steven Pinker’s defence of scientism in the pages of the *New Republic* (2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Pitt-Rivers (1890-1966), a long-term member – and officer – of the Eugenics Society, was later interned (1940-42) as a Nazi fellow traveller. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Fleure wrote extensively on the need for increasing contact between people of different backgrounds and cultures, both to promote peace and to encourage originality, creativity and discovery. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. He had already spent twenty-five years serving as both the hon. secretary of the Geographical Association and editor of its journal *Geography (Nature*, 1944), turning it into the central body for both the organisation of geography teaching at all levels within the education system and as a source of support for the training of geography teachers themselves (Stamp, 1948). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See the Herbert John Fleure Papers, held in the archives at the National Library of Wales (GB 0210 HERURE, item 19 ‘Early notebook of notes and drawings, perhaps for lectures’) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ellis (1859-1939) was a doctor, social reformer and public intellectual who wrote and published widely in the late 19th-early 20th century. He was also a member and president of the Eugenics Society. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Also included here should be the ten-volume *Corridors of Time* series published by the Clarendon Press, which he wrote with Harold Peake. The series began in 1927 (Peake & Fleure, 1927) and ended in 1956, a decade after Peake’s death (Peake & Fleure, 1956). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ur, referenced in the Bible as the birthplace of Abraham, was discovered in 1862 and excavated in 1927 by Leonard Woolley to vast public interest (Woolley, 1929; Winstone, 1990) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Herbet John Fleure Papers: items 25 (‘Ancient Lands’), 32 (‘Races’) and 33 (‘Simple Societies’). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Cantre’r Gwalod, sometimes called the ‘Welsh Atlantis’, tells the story of a once-prosperous West Wales kingdom, protected from the Irish Sea by dykes and sluice gates. Unfortunately, its people got lazy (or drunk, in some versions), stopped taking care of their sea protections – and were soon drowned in the waters of what is now Cardigan Bay. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Fleure was also involved in a similar survey of the Isle of Man (Davies & Fleure, 1936). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Herbert John Fleure Papers, NLW/LlGC, Item 39 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Herbert John Fleure Papers, NLW/LlGC, Item 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Herbert John Fleure Papers, NLW/LlGC, Item 40 ‘Manuscript papers [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Siphonophorae are a class of marine animals that, while appearing to be individuals, are in fact colonial organisms. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Herbert John Fleure Papers, NLW/LlGC, Item 39 ‘Manuscript Papers’. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Herbert John Fleure Papers, NLW/LlGC, Item 39 ‘Manuscript Papers’. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)