

Dart: Scientist and Man of Gift

Frances Wheelhouse and Kathaleen S. Smithford

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"All sciences are odd in some way," observed Matt Cartmill, "but paleoanthropology is one of the oddest," and so is, one might add, its history. Curiously, historical research into this potentially rewarding subject was neglected for a long time. The last few decades, however, have produced a number of books, papers, and doctoral dissertations on the history of paleoanthropology, with several biographical studies among them. The biographical studies include a recently published book on Raymond Dart, one of the major figures in the history of the study of human evolution. Dart was one of the pioneers of paleoanthropology who bore the fiercely contested title of discoverer of the 'Missing Link,' a creature that was assumed to be the evolutionary link between humans and their ape-like ancestors. Dart's scientific contributions go far beyond his spectacular fossil finds, however, and his life and work provide a considerable challenge to a historian.

Before Wheelhouse and Smithford's biography of Dart appeared, there were two notable books on the life of this great scientist: Raymond Dart's own *Adventures with the Missing Link*, written in 1959 with the help of journalist Dennis Craig, and Phillip Tobias's *Dart, Taung and the "Missing Link"*, published in 1984. Both books are valuable in different ways. The first is a popular, well-written account of Dart's main paleoanthropological works and contains useful biographical information. Tobias's book is only 67 pages long and covers mainly the Taung discovery, still providing probably the most authoritative account. A more comprehensive work concerning the life of one of the most important figures in the history of paleoanthropology was therefore still to be written, and Dart's biography was eagerly awaited by many. Unfortunately, its appearance has not met expectations.

The book provides an overview of the renowned anthropologist's rich scientific career but it can be regarded only as a useful compilation of historical data concerning his life, mainly from secondary sources. The broader scientific and social context is only briefly touched upon, with the authors relying on just a few popular works. The biography is written in an old-fashioned 'great man' style, in which Dart figures as a scientific genius who was far ahead of his time, was not understood, and was abused by authorities unwilling to accept new ideas. History, however, is far more complex--this is clearly shown in many recent works on the history of science.

More important, the major problem with the book is that it has not been adequately researched. The first author published a slender volume in 1983 entitled *Raymond Dart: A Pictorial Profile*. She gathered materials for the book, mostly photographs and some biographical data, in South Africa, where Dart spent most of his life. The new book gives the impression that she has not visited, or at least not worked on Dart's biography, in that country since then. Subsequent to his death in 1988, though, Dart's family bequeathed his papers to the University of the Witwatersrand. They are presently kept in the University's archives. These papers should constitute the main source of information for any potential biography of Dart. They contain Dart's correspondence, drafts, notes, administrative documents, manuscripts, etc. Among these are historical jewels, such as the unpublished manuscript of the monograph on the Taung

fossil (with Elliot Smith's notes and recommendations), the unpublished manuscript of a book on the Italian African Expedition From Cape to Cairo (together with the publisher's letter of rejection), and the early drafts of *Adventures with the Missing Link* (where the publisher required major revisions, which led to Dennis Craig's involvement). Strangely, Wheelhouse and Smithford did not use these valuable sources. They conducted research in archives in the United Kingdom and Australia and interviewed some of the people who had been in contact with Dart, but the information gleaned is but marginal compared to that offered by the University of the Witwatersrand Archives.

The secondary sources have also not been explored completely. There is a lack of reference to several recent papers that offer fresh perspectives on Dart's work, such as those by Saul Dubow and by Jane Dugard, and even some relevant papers written by Phillip Tobias, whose works are one of the major sources for the book. Moreover, although six out of the 26 chapters are devoted to the Italian Scientific Expedition, in which Dart took part, books written about it by the expedition's leader, Attilio Gatti, are not consulted.

Finally, numerous spelling mistakes and inaccuracies give the impression that editing was sloppy or not done at all. For example, on page 253 the authors state that Dart's *Adventures with the Missing Link* was translated into the "Czechoslovakian" language and in the Glossary (page 317) they define the cranium as the "skull, including the mandible (lower jaw)."

Therefore, nothing significantly new, in either fact or interpretation, is to be found in this biography. Exceptions are five chapters written by Smithford which contain reminiscences of her long friendship with Dart and include some previously unknown information concerning the scientist's life in the 1930s. These are, however, more like materials for a biography than a biography itself.

Raymond Dart's extraordinary life and his work, which was controversial, provocative, and ground-breaking, await more comprehensive historical evaluation.

- 2008 Raymond Arthur Dart: the man who unwillingly ushered in a revolution in the evolution of humankind, in O. Harman & M.R. Dietrich (ed.) *Rebels, mavericks, and heretics in biology*: 84-102. New Haven: Yale University Press. Google Scholar. Wheelhouse, F. & K.S. Smithford. 2001. *Dart: scientist and man of grit*. Sydney: Transpareon Press. Google Scholar. Copyright information. © Springer Science+Business Media New York 2014. Authors and Affiliations.