

EDWARD TYLOR

(1832-1917)

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Sir Edward Tylor's reputation has been eclipsed during this century by that of another knight of cultural anthropology, Sir James Frazer, his junior by some thirty years. Tylor is not listed, for example -- as are Frazer, Sir Henry Maine and Herbert Spencer -- in the useful guide to significant yearly publications, *Annals of English Literature 1475-1950*, and it is Frazer's work that has been diffused through creative literature in the writings of T. S. Eliot and others.

Yet it was certainly Tylor who dominated, shaped and consolidated anthropology in Britain for the first fifty years of its development. After his *Researches into the Early History of Mankind and the Development of Civilisation* (1865), anthropology really was 'Mr. Tylor's science' as Max Müller and others called it. His other substantial book *Primitive Culture* (1871) was described in the *Pall Mall Gazette's* review of *The Golden Bough* as standing with that work and Herbert Spencer's *Principles of Sociology* 'among the main foundations of the new science of human belief and human institutions'.

Both Andrew Lang and R. R. Marett referred to Tylor as their 'father, Parmenides', and D. H. Lawrence, speaking for the discerning general reader, recommended *Primitive Culture* to Lady Ottoline Morell and John Middleton Murry as 'a very good, sound substantial book, I had far rather read it than *The Golden Bough* or Gilbert Murray'. Tylor was also well known in the wider world of scholarship, becoming a fellow of the Royal Society before he was thirty and continuing to receive honours for the rest of his life. He became Keeper of the Pitt-Rivers Museum and later Professor at Oxford.

And though anthropologists still often couple 'Tylor and Frazer' as the Tweedledum and Tweedledee of their subject's history, most would probably agree with D. H. Lawrence that Tylor's work is more substantial than Frazer's, and stands the test of time better than that of any other Victorian anthropologist except perhaps Sir Henry Maine.

All Victorian writings in the subject are, of course, outdated and offer more to the historian of ideas than to modern students of anthropology. But if Tylor's contribution also must be assessed for the most part historically, his individual gifts are outstanding. For his period he had remarkably few philosophical, religious or racial obsessions; and as the first great synthesizer and sifter of ethnological knowledge it was he who largely created the universe of discourse inherited, through Frazer and Malinowski, by the senior living generation of British anthropologists.

Edward Burnett Tylor was born in 1832, the son of a Quaker brassfounder in whose business for a short time as a young man he learnt something of working life outside the groves of academe. For him as for other Dissenters, many of Quaker stock like himself, the new science of ethnology was of more than scientific importance. With their sense of Christian responsibility for peoples then commonly treated by Europeans as creatures of a different and inferior species to themselves, they sought in ethnology a scientific basis for the philanthropic principles expressed notably in the founding of the Aborigines' Protection Society in 1837. This moral interest, if not religiously grounded, has characterized much anthropological writing in the present century.

Further, the Dissenters' religious disabilities saved them from a too conventional education with its emphasis on the established church and the Greek and Latin classics as ultimate arbiters of moral and intellectual value. Their sympathies were not trained to the same exclusiveness as those of others of their class, with their prolonged schooling in national self-esteem. Hence, though Tylor, like all the rest at that time, takes the existence of 'higher' and 'lower' peoples for granted, he never lapses into the condescension and sensationalism with regard to 'savages' that mar the studies of Darwin and Frazer, not to speak of the arrogant Sir Richard Burton and his like. His claim to a sense of community with the most 'primitive' men rings true and just at a time when Trollope in *Barchester Towers* was depicting a contemporary society where even close Italian connexions set a family of British gentlefolk rather below the salt.

It may then have been an advantage to Tylor as an anthropologist that he was largely self-educated, though not, it should be added, in labouring penury. And for his achievement in the subject he was later to profess, it is particularly relevant that this self-education included early in his life a spell of foreign travel more exciting than the European tour. At the age of 24, travelling in the New World for his health, he was diverted by a chance meeting with the archaeologist Christy on the way to Mexico, where they spent some months together.

His first book, *Anahuac: or Mexico and the Mexicans Ancient and Modern* (1861) is a record of that journey. It opens with a paragraph showing the bent of Tylor's mind at that time:

In the spring of 1856, I met with Mr. Christy accidentally in an omnibus at Havana. He had been in Cuba for some months, leading an adventurous life, visiting sugar plantations, copper mines and coffee estates, descending into caves, and botanizing in tropical jungles, cruising for a fortnight in an open boat among the coral reefs, hunting turtles and manatees, and visiting all sorts of people from whom information was to be had, from foreign consuls and Lazarist missionaries down to retired slave dealers and assassins.

But the passage shows also the value set upon direct and varied experience that inspired the fieldwork characteristic of Tylor's successors, and without

which knowledge of peoples outside our own backyard would now be flimsy indeed. And travelling as he was in a land of endemic revolution, without the helping hand of a British colonial government, Tylor may well have had an insight into difficulties of research not commonly experienced again by anthropologists until colonial independence.

In ranging from speculations on the history of an ancient non-classical civilization to studying prisons, cockfights and labour conditions, *Anahuac* also prefigures Tylor's later insistence on the ideal comprehensiveness of anthropological study. 'Narrow it down, Mr. Tylor!' his academic advisers urged for the syllabus at Oxford, but he held to his view that a narrow scholarship was not worthy of the Science of Man. How and if to 'narrow it down' remains a problem in elementary teaching.

In *Primitive Culture* Tylor himself faced this problem, and in a way not very different from that of today. He writes in the preface;

In discussing problems so complex as those of the development of civilization, it is not enough to put forward theories accompanied by a few illustrative facts. The statement of the facts must form the staple of the argument [my italics] . . . Should it seem to any readers that my attempt . . . sometimes leads to the heaping up of too cumbrous detail, I would point out that the theoretical novelty as well as the practical importance of many of the issues raised make it most inadvisable to stint them of their full evidence.

The great interwar field-monographs – such as Malinowski's *Coral Gardens and their Magic*, R. Firth's *We, the Tikopia* and E. E. Evans-Pritchard's *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande* – have been constructed on these lines; and though anthropologists have recognized the futility of merely amassing ethnographic detail (not, I hasten to say, characteristic of the books mentioned), this has been less a denial of its value than a plea for a more adventurous approach to thinking about it, as in Edmund Leach's *Rethinking Anthropology*.

For Tylor this particular intellectual disquiet of our postwar studies did not exist. His *was* the new thought that he confidently expected to lead to a new society. He was absolutely assured of an underlying evolutionary order in all human development; and though he recognized more than many did that there had been long halts and shameful retreats in the great march of mind (of which the spiritualism of the time seemed to him a disgracefully cowardly withdrawal) he had no doubt that every human fact was stationed somewhere along the route.

If this philosophy of progress provided him with an organizing principle for the vast range of information which is still a strength and an embarrassment to anthropologists, it also directed his thought into a highway that came abruptly to a dead end with the First World War. Whether or not the general course of history has been one of progressive social improvement now concerns anthropologists as little as the conflict between biblical and zoological or

scientific versions of human origins which then fired Tylor's arguments; and it is here that Tylor seems less a father than a fuddy-duddy.

But, also, Tylor's approach to humankind went with a greater regard for what then seemed humble human achievements than the High Bayswater vision of Herbert Spencer, and it led him to a conception of culture – which it seems strange now that this should be so – was new when he formed it:

Culture or Civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. The condition of culture among the various societies of mankind, in so far as it is capable of being investigated on general principles, is a subject apt for the study of laws of human thought and action.

Tylor's use of 'culture' in this sense derives explicitly from his readings in German 'cultural-history', but it was he who began to give it its neutral anthropological sense. (His usage might be contrasted with that of, say, Matthew Arnold, for whom 'culture' was the opposite of the 'barbarism' that Tylor found so worthy of serious attention.)

So, after *Primitive Culture*, which opens with the passage quoted above, it became possible to speak of the 'cultures' and 'civilizations' of peoples who had been commonly considered to lack either. Upon this simple reorientation of the meaning of a word much subsequent anthropological work depended.

In America and at least in the early stages of teaching in Britain, 'cultures' are still the broad entities studied by anthropologists, as the title of a recent introduction to social anthropology, John Beattie's *Other Cultures*, suggests. Daryll Forde's *Habitat, Economy and Society* also shows what instructional use of the concept can be put to. But for many years in Britain particularly, the term has also been thought ultimately to obstruct analytic thought and comparison, providing only for a descriptive integration of the material. The study of structural relations, abstracted from the whole cultural reality, has permitted greater intellectual advance.

Nevertheless structural anthropologists necessarily still draw upon Tylor's notion of culture. It is centrally important, for example, to the main theses of Lévi-Strauss, and it is assumed in much of that pioneer work on political structure, Evans-Pritchard's *The Nuer*. Others of Tylor's main interests, too, if the mental parallax of his own period be allowed for, may have more in common with modern trends than would have been expected when Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown governed theoretical anthropology.

Durkheim, representing the tradition of French sociological thought that is a major influence in theoretical work now, rightly rejected Tylor's individualistic and intellectualist interpretations of symbolic activity – his idea, for example, that primitive man arrived at religious belief by faulty reasoning from effect to cause. But Tylor's still deeper concern with language, meaning, modes of thought and communication has in part lived on in recent writings. Linguistic analysts – Whorf, for example – might well

find as much of the real spirit of their investigations in Tylor as in his more sociologistic successors. Again, Robin Horton (in articles in *Africa* and the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*) and Lawrence and Meggit (*Gods, Ghosts and Men in Melanesia*, 1965) are only three modern fieldworkers who urge the value of a more sophisticated version of Tylor's theories of 'primitive' thought; while such observers of the 'expressive' character of symbolic action as John Beattie or V. W. Turner have in Tylor a Victorian prototype.

At a time when a version of Lévi-Strauss's *La Pensée Sauvage* has been translated into English (misleading enough as *The Savage Mind!*) it is worth quoting at some length a passage from Tylor upon a related topic. Stripped of its rationalism, it does open a vein of inquiry that has been most profitably worked by Malinowski, Evans-Pritchard, Lévi-Strauss and many of their followers.

Tylor is considering the etymologists' account of the 'meaning' of words:

But explanations of this kind have no bearing on the practical use of such words by mankind at large, who take what is given them and ask no questions...there is a great deal to be said for the view that much of the accuracy of our modern languages is due to their having so far 'lost consciousness' of the derivation of their words, which thus become like counters or algebraic symbols, good to represent just what they are set down to mean...when it comes to exact argument, it may be that the distinctness of our apprehension of what a words means is not always increased by a misty recollection hovering about it in our minds, that it or its family once meant something else. For such purposes, what is required is not so much a knowledge of etymology, as accurate definition, and the practice of checking words by realizing the things and actions they are used to denote.

Problems of meaning are crucial to anthropologists with their dependence on translation; this indeed may be what differentiates them from straight sociologists more than either realizes. And here in Tylor, it seems to me, is the germ of an idea that Lévi-Strauss has approached from a different angle in his recently translated book – the idea that there are two broadly different, and for Lévi-Strauss complementary, forms of apprehension and systems of knowledge.

On the one hand there is 'wild' thought, creating its image of the world by means of associations suggested by concrete experience of living. Here, the proliferations of meaning that Tylor associates with etymological explanation are the essential feature. On the other hand there is 'domesticated' thought, analytic in a quite different way, and depending for its effectiveness on so to speak breeding out the wild etymological strain. It says something for Tylor's intellectual vitality that he would have understood some of Lévi-Strauss's work, different as his attitudes towards the facts might have been.

R. R. Marett's *Tylor* (1936) gives a good account of the 'theoretical contributions' with which he is conventionally accredited: the invention of the term animism, 'a belief in spiritual beings', for the root of all religions; his use of

comparative methods, with attempts at statistical correlations; his stress on material culture; and so on. But others have done this much better since his time. What really still recommends him is the spirit and tone of his scholarship, and the breadth of vision that enabled him to see large issues in anthropology that have continued, if in a different way, to engage attention.

And practical services to the subject are not to be ignored. Tylor certainly laid good foundations in Oxford where he taught. Some years ago, Sir John Myres recalled Tylor's last, unfortunately clouded, years:

He resented the rejection of his project for a degree examination in anthropology. It was an unholy alliance, he said, between Theology, *Literae Humaniores* and Natural Sciences. Theology, teaching the True God, objected to false gods; *Literae Humaniores* knew only the cultures of Greece and Rome; Natural Sciences were afraid that the new learning would empty their lecture rooms. And the arch-villain was Spooner of New College, whom he never forgave.

But Tylor got his own back. Until quite recently students of social anthropology in Oxford were filling every room of 11 Keble Road -- once Warden Spooner's own home.