EDWARD B. TYLOR

By ROBERT H. LOWIE

EDWARD B. TYLOR, who died on January 2, 1917, at the age of eighty-four, had long been an historic personality. He loomed up as one of the very last figures rooted in the heroic age of nineteenth century science, as the peer and comrade in arms of Wallace, Huxley, and Spencer. The dean of ethnologists for two score years, he represented his science before students of other branches of knowledge and, thanks to the high literary quality of his style, before the cultured laity as well. He was read and cited by psychologist and historian, biologist and philosopher, by every one interested in the ways and thoughts of primitive man. And while the circle of his influence widened, he retained the profound and growing respect of his professional colleagues. Even with the irreverent group of American fieldworkers who turn up their noses at the classical school of ethnologists his prestige remains undiminished and their allegiance is of the kind he himself advocated,—no slavish acceptance of tenets but a following of methods "through better evidence to higher ends."

Edward Burnett Tylor was born at Camberwell on October 2, 1832, and educated at Grove House School, Tottenham. After a brief business career he traveled for several years and in 1856 visited Mexico in the company of Henry Christy, an anthropologist to whose personal stimulation he pays a generous tribute in the second edition of the *Researches*. The American trip led to Tylor's first publication, a book on *Anahuac; or Mexico and the Mexicans* (1861). Several years later appeared the *Researches into the Early History of Mankind and the Development of Civilization* (1865). This work laid the foundation of his professional fame, which reached its acme in 1871 with the publication of *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art, and Custom.* In 1881 he wrote a most serviceable

textbook on *Anthropology: an Introduction to the Study of Man and Civilization.*

Though not a university graduate, Tylor became connected with Oxford, both in the capacity of keeper of the University Museum and as a lecturer, being "reader in anthropology" from 1884–1895 and "professor" from 1895–1909, when he became an emeritus. Of the numerous honors conferred on him only two need be mentioned here. He was elected to a fellowship by the Royal Society in 1871 and knighted in 1912. A volume of *Anthropological Essays presented to Edward Burnett Tylor in honor of his Seventy-fifth Birthday* bore testimony to the regard of his fellow-workers. The bibliography concluding that volume indicates the extraordinary number of smaller and scattered contributions that fell from his pen in the course of years, and we learn with deep regret that a great work he had been preparing for many years was never published, which was also the fate of his ten Gifford lectures on Natural Religion, delivered at Aberdeen in 1889–1890.[1]

The most obvious feature that distinguishes Tylor's work from that of his English contemporaries and successors is the universality of his ethnological interests. Others, like Lang and Frazer, were predominantly occupied with sociological and religious problems; Tylor's vision embraced, to cite his own definition of culture,

> 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.

He was equally attracted by the description of a Malagasy bellows and by an account of the South American couvade, by the process of stone-boiling and by solar mythology.

In Tylor's attitude towards the immense mass of concrete fact with which his versatility brought him into contact a distinctive psychological trait is manifest—his intuitive sense of fitness. We must recall the character of the data available when he commenced his life work—the hodge-podge of imperfect observation and pro-

[1] The biographical data are taken from Lang's sketch in the anniversary volume cited above and from Professor Haddon's obituary notice in *Nature* (Jan. 11, 1917), p. 373.

vincial bias with which he was obliged to deal in order to get at the mere facts. To be sure, there was excellent material by men like Cranz, Sahagun, or Callaway. But even the most reputable of the older writers were prone to state as fact what was either crude misinformation at second-hand or crude misinterpretation due to the colored spectacles of European civilization. What shall we say when we find Burton declaring that the Arapaho possessed so scanty a vocabulary that they could hardly converse with one another in the dark when gestures were invisible, or Baker denying any form of religion to the aborigines of the Upper Nile region? In the evaluation of such utterances Tylor showed an almost unerring instinct, all the more commendable since many of the wild statements of this type would have fitted admirably into that general evolutionary scheme of the universe which he himself was helping to develop.

This critical judgment was apparent in the discussion of problems as well as in the weighing of travelers' accounts, but here the result was not so uniformly satisfactory. Indeed, the question obtrudes itself, whether Tylor's famous caution was not sometimes conformity to a scientific ethical ideal of fairness in discussion rather than a trait inherent in his mental make-up. He certainly carried the judicial weighing of pros and cons to an exceptional degree. On re-reading the *Researches into the Early History of Mankind*, I can understand Wallace's irritation at its indecisiveness and Lubbock's misunderstanding of the argument as to the single origin or independent development of the couvade. But whatever formal hedging there may be in the marshaling of arguments, the conclusion sometimes appears as a thunderbolt out of a blue sky, as when historical connection is used to interpret the existence in remote areas of the cure by extracting pathogenic agents from the patient's body.

This illustration, however, brings up a topic which shows Tylor to the greatest possible advantage in historical perspective. Though certainly a strong believer in the independent evolution of cultural phenomena in distinct areas of the globe, he was very much alive to the influence of diffusion. In the Introduction to the English

translation of Ratzel's *History of Mankind* he contrasts "the small part of art and custom which any people may have invented or adapted for themselves" with "the large part which has been acquired by adopting from foreigners whatever was seen to suit their own circumstances." Indeed, in many concrete instances he goes much further than at all events modern American ethnologists are inclined to follow. The case of cure by suction has already been cited, while another chapter of the same book prefigures in principle the recent hypothesis of a cultural connection between aboriginal America and the Old World. Whatever we may think of particular interpretations offered by Tylor, the traditional American conception of him as merely an evolutionist of the classical school is ridiculously false. His suggestive and indeed conclusive discussion of the Malagasy iron technique alone suffices to show what a valuable tool he sometimes made of the principle of historical connection.

Nevertheless, it remains true that Tylor's name will always be most prominently connected with the doctrine of evolution. In this context it is very cheap to assume an unhistorically critical attitude. We must recollect that just as he had to sift the chaotic mass of ethnographic observations in order to extract the actual facts so in the interpretation of culture history he had to contend with a powerful, theologically inspired theory of degeneration against which the principle of progressive evolution had to be established and defended. To have accomplished this task so effectively is in itself no mean achievement to Tylor's credit. But Tylor further enriched the doctrine of cultural evolution by the development of a definite and elaborate scheme for the subject of religion. To enter into a discussion of this theory of animism is out of the question within the limits of this notice. Suffice it to say that as presented in *Primitive Culture* it remains, in spite of all criticism, the most impressive theory of primitive religion yet advanced.

To philosophical ethnology Tylor contributed the concept of survivals and the intimately associated method of "adhesions" outlined in his ever memorable paper "On a Method of Investigating

the Development of Institutions; Applied to the Laws of Marriage and Descent," which was presented to the Anthropological Institute in November, 1888, and published in vol. XVIII (1889) of its *Journal*. It must be reckoned a distinct loss to science that the complete data on which this lecture was based were never published. The fundamental idea is the application of statistical methods to the data of ethnography. If two or more cultural traits are repeatedly found in association, are we dealing with a chance combination or is there an organic correlation? Tylor compares the number of times such combinations might be expected to occur on the doctrine of probabilities if each feature were independent of the others with the number of occurrences empirically found, and where the latter is clearly in excess he infers a causal connection. In this manner, *e. g.*, he establishes a functional relationship between the exogamous dual organization and the classificatory systems of kinship terminology, between the parent-in-law taboo and matrilocal residence, and between the couvade and a mixed maternal-paternal organization.

The very idea of introducing into a branch of knowledge that is so often the happy hunting-ground of the curiosity-seeking dilettante something of the rigor of the exact sciences is one of wellnigh unparalleled magnificence. Nothing that Tylor ever did serves so decisively to lift him above the throng of his fellow-workers. Without that paper he might have ranked as a sort of super-Lang or super-Frazer—more universal in his grasp than either, more serious and erudite than the one, far more trustworthy in his judgment than the other. But the paper on Method raises him at once into an entirely different category of intellectual being.

In the appraisal of this contribution several points should be considered separately. In the first place, quite apart from the main argument, Tylor here first conceptualized certain phenomena which have since loomed more or less prominently in ethnographic literature, *viz.*, teknonymy and cross-cousin marriage. Secondly, he was fully aware of the fact that it is one thing to establish the mere fact that two features are causally related and quite another to determine the reason for the association. The former is by far

the more important methodologically and whatever criticism may be advanced against Tylor's specific conception of the nature of the correlation does not affect the core of the method. This likewise remains valid even if we reject the evolutionary interpretation which Tylor gave to certain of his observed correlations. Finding no instances of the couvade among matrilineal tribes, twenty cases among peoples with a mixed system, and eight in patrilineal communities, Tylor not only inferred that the institution had originated in the mixed system and dwindled away with paternal descent but also that this established the priority of matrilineal descent. Obviously, this conclusion does not follow from the empirical facts of correlation but already involves the acceptance of a unilinear scheme of evolution.

The essential objection to Tylor's paper, as pointed out in the oral discussion by Galton and Flower, rests on his neglect of diffusion. If the same combination recurs a hundred times among tribes that have had no historical connection, we have indeed established a rule of organic correlation; but if the combination has been disseminated from a single point of origin there is no means of proving that we are dealing with more than a mere chance association. We in America who accept diffusion to a considerable extent but at the same time admit independent development are confronted with the fact that exactly the same usages are found in remote regions of the globe between which any connection remains unproved. On the other hand, these similarities do seem to go hand in hand with certain other similarities, with which therefore they seem to be functionally related. This means that where one of the traits occurs, we can legitimately infer its one-time association with the correlated trait. We must insist against Tylor that the particular tribe in question may have borrowed the feature isolated from its old context; but to assert that such a correlation as that between the avunculate and a matrilineal organization is due to sheer chance is ridiculous, more so than the wildest Graebnerism, which at least does not blink at the observed fact of complete cultural identity. The best evidence for such an organic correlation seems to me to have been advanced in the field of kinship nomencla-

ture, where Tylor himself established the relation of the classificatory system with exogamy. But the method is applicable to an indefinite number of similar problems, and ethnologists will do well to turn to Tylor's extraordinarily stimulating and fruitful mode of investigation.

Over and above his specific contributions, Tylor had a clear vision of the place of ethnology in modern civilization. The facts of primitive life were to him not mere specimens for a museum of psychological oddities nor was he altogether satisfied with using them as bricks for a theory of cultural development. Beyond its academic aspects he maintained that "such research has its practical side, as a source of power destined to influence the course of modern ideas and actions." The sight of mankind painfully groping through the ages from the crude fist hatchet to modern technology must inspire active endeavor to add to the heritage of the past. But ethnology also reveals in modern law, ethics, and theology innumerable survivals from primitive savagery, which it marks out for destruction, being in Tylor's own words "essentially a reformer's science."

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