

BYWAYS IN OXFORD ANTHROPOLOGY

T. S. ELIOT, LAWRENCE OF ARABIA,
AND OXFORD ANTHROPOLOGY, 1914-1915

The uses to which anthropological knowledge can be put are various. In the early years of this century anthropology could be connected with anything from criminology to Montessori schools. It was this breadth and indefinability of the subject which caused the publication of Gieserud's *Science of Anthropology*, a book which the New York *Nation's* reviewer on 2 July, 1908 wrote of as the 'outgrowth of an earlier effort to alleviate the worries and perplexities haunting the classifier of books as well as the amateur scientist, taking up this most unsettling and vaguely limited field of study'. But that very vagueness of outline attracted many non-anthropologists towards the emerging discipline. So Yale's W. G. Sumner moved from economics to the writing of *Folkways*, while Rancke, who became Professor of Anthropology at Munich, had come to the study via physiology. In the arts, writers from Edith Wharton to Aldous Huxley were interested in anthropology, while the study as well as the production of literature was being altered by the material which anthropologists presented. In May 1914, Gilbert Murray was lecturing to the Oxford University Anthropological Society on 'Folk-Influence in Early Greek Literature'.¹ Those who were students at that time realized the significant effect which anthropological knowledge was making in the field of classical scholarship.

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¹ The author is grateful to Dr R.G. Lienhardt for permission to examine the records of the Oxford University Anthropological Society.

Few books are more fascinating than those of Miss Harrison, Mr. Cornford, or Mr. Cooke, when they burrow in the origins of Greek myths and rites; M. Durkheim, with his social consciousness, and M. Lévy-Bruhl, with his Bororo Indians who convince themselves that they are parroquets, are delightful writers. A number of sciences have sprung up in an almost tropical exuberance which undoubtedly excites our admiration, and the garden, not unnaturally, has come to resemble a jungle. Such men as Tylor, and Robertson Smith, and Wilhelm Wundt, who early fertilized the soil, would hardly recognize the resulting vegetation; and indeed poor Wundt's *Völkerpsychologie* was a musty relic before it was translated.

All these events are useful and important in their phase, and they have sensibly affected our attitude towards the Classics; and it is this phase of classical study that Professor Murray - the friend and inspirer of Miss Jane Harrison - represents. The Greek is no longer the awe-inspiring Belvedere of Winckelman, Goethe, and Schopenhauer....²

T.S. Eliot, who wrote these words in 1920, did not hear Gilbert Murray's lecture to the Oxford University Anthropological Society. He did not arrive in Oxford until later in 1914, when he matriculated as a graduate student of philosophy at Merton College. But it has been argued most plausibly that as an undergraduate at Harvard, Eliot had attended Murray's Gardiner Lane Lectures on Homer which were published in extended form as *The Rise of the Greek Epic*, and that 'For the young Eliot one of the most significant things in Murray's lectures must have been Murray's interest in anthropology'.³

In this article I wish to concentrate on Eliot's stay in Oxford in 1914-15, the anthropological material with which he came in contact at this time, and the repercussions which that contact had in his work. But I shall also glance at two other noteworthy figures whose reading of anthropology in Oxford in 1914-15 has not been remarked on, and whose interest in anthropology again indicates how diverse were the attractions of of the subject.

Eliot was not the only famous twentieth-century English writer

² Reprinted by permission of Faber and Faber Ltd. from 'Euripides and Professor Murray' in *Selected Essays* (Third Enlarged Edition, London: Faber and Faber 1951), by T. S. Eliot, pp. 62-3.

³ David Ward, *T. S. Eliot Between Two Worlds*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1973, p. 46.

to have been acquainted with the work of Robertson Smith. In 1914 his work may have been read more ardently for its theoretical speculation than it is today, but it could also have its practical applications. On September 7 of that year a young man sat in the Bodleian reading *The Religion of the Semites*.⁴ The young man was in the habit of reading archaeological material, mainly dealing with the Middle East, but he also studied works of anthropological interest. A couple of months earlier he had been examining the maps and photographs of Alois Musil's three-volume *Arabia Petraea*. But now he read about communion rites in Robertson Smith. This anthropological knowledge would stand him in good stead in the years to come when he ceased to be simply a student and went on to make history beyond the Bodleian. The young reader's name was T. E. Lawrence.

Around the time when the future Lawrence of Arabia was leaving the Bodleian, an older man was enrolling as a reader. This was Charles Ellwood, Professor of Sociology at the University of Missouri, who had come to Oxford to further his knowledge of sociology and anthropology, and his application to become a reader at the Bodleian had been sponsored by R. R. Marett, the Reader in Social Anthropology. Ellwood was concerned with one of the contemporary groups which commonly drew on anthropological materials to propound their arguments: the eugenics movement. In the year before coming to Oxford he had lectured in America on 'The Eugenics Movement from the Standpoint of Sociology', but if his interests were more sociological than anthropological, then the distinction between the two, particularly in this period, was difficult to draw, and while in Oxford Ellwood did not look solely at sociological pieces. Reading through the recent copies of *The Sociological Review* which he requested to see in the Bodleian on October 19, 1914, he came across pieces on 'The Mentality of the Australian Aborigines', and on 'Professor Westermarck's Jubilee'. Edward Westermarck was an anthropologist who had conducted his fieldwork in Morocco. In 1906 he had followed his earlier massive *History of Human Marriage* with the first volume of an even more comprehensive work, *The Origin and Development of the Moral Ideas*, which had earned him the title of 'the Darwin of moral science'.⁵ There is no evidence that Charles Ellwood met T. S. Eliot when the two were in Oxford, but it is not impossible that such a meeting took place. Both men were from Missouri, and they would have had anthropological interests in common, one of which would have been the work of Edward Westermarck.

T. S. Eliot, however, never joined the Anthropological

⁴ I am grateful to Ms Susan Shaw of the Bodleian Library for her help in locating entry books for the period.

⁵ A. E. Crawley, 'Professor Westermarck's Jubilee', *The Sociological Review*, 1913, p. 55.

Society, though he was familiar with several of the topics which were being discussed there at the time. These topics included Durkheim and his school, and *The Golden Bough*, a critical appreciation of which was delivered by Dr Farnell, Rector of Exeter College, when the Society met for its seventy-fifth meeting on 15 January 1915. It is possible but unlikely that Eliot attended this meeting as a guest. The Merton graduate student did not take a great part in the social life of Oxford. He did not even join the Bodleian, doing much of his Oxford reading in his room at Merton. Oxford as a whole he disliked, commenting in a letter of 1914 to Conrad Aiken that, though it was very pretty, he did not like to be dead.⁶ At Merton he took out few books from the College Library. But on Saturday, 27 February 1915 he took away to his room the two large volumes of the first edition of Westermarck's *The Origin and Development of the Moral Ideas*. Eliot returned these books to the College Library on 10 March.⁷

It should not be surprising that Eliot was reading Westermarck's work. At Merton the young American was studying Aristotle with Harold Joachim, the 'Greats' tutor in philosophy who later became Professor of Philosophy at New College. Westermarck's study was of philosophical as well as anthropological interest. But Eliot would relish its anthropological as well as its philosophical content. The year before, as a graduate student at Harvard, he had written his paper on 'The Interpretation of Primitive Ritual', a paper recently rediscovered by Piers Gray in the Library of King's College, Cambridge. Gray discusses and quotes liberally from the paper in his book, *T. S. Eliot's Intellectual and Poetic Development, 1909-1922* (Brighton 1982). This paper shows Eliot's anthropological reading to have been wide, and demonstrates how early he was acquainted with writers such as Durkheim, Lévy-Bruhl, Frazer, and Gilbert Murray. Though Cornford's synthesis of anthropology and classical scholarship, *The Origin of Attic Comedy* (which would be of crucial importance for Eliot's play, *Sweeney Agonistes*) appeared in 1914, when Eliot was studying Greek philosophy in Oxford, I have found no evidence that he read it at this time. But his reading of Westermarck in Oxford shows that his anthropological interests were continuing.

⁶ Quoted by Conrad Aiken in 'King Bolo and Others', in Tambimuttu and Richard March (eds.), *T. S. Eliot [1948]*, London: Frank Cass 1965, p. 23.

⁷ For information about Eliot's borrowings from Merton College Library I am grateful to Dr Roger Highfield and Mr J. Burgass of Merton College. The copy of Westermarck remains in Merton College Library where I have examined it. Eliot made no marginal annotations and in Volume II pages 516-17, 540-41, 604-5, and 636-37 are uncut.

Evidence of such interests is present also in his other writings of 1914-15. Eliot was disenchanted not only with Oxford, but with academic life in general. One of the poems, written during his year at Oxford, 'Mr. Apollinax', demonstrates this clearly, and also shows signs of Eliot's anthropological interests as the reader is allowed to glimpse, for instance,

... Priapus in the shrubbery.⁸

Later in the poem there would seem to be another anthropological prompted section. Eliot was a visitor of museums, having written about the Peabody Museum at Salem, Massachusetts in the *Harvard Advocate* of 25 May 1909, and, in an unpublished poem of about 1915 set in the British Museum, about ladies disappearing behind Assyrian sculptures (Assyriology was flourishing in Eliot's student days). It is probable, though records do not survive, that he visited the Pitt Rivers Museum while in Oxford, as Yeats was to do later when he was living in Oxford. But where the Irish poet was attracted to the Japanese Noh masks, the young American may have gravitated more towards the Oxford museum's splendid collection of shrunken heads. Certainly in 'Mr. Apollinax' the speaker himself turns head-hunter in the lines:

I looked for the head of Mr. Apollinax rolling under a chair
Or grinning over a screen
With seaweed in its hair.⁸

Head-hunting was a subject which continued to interest Eliot throughout his career as a writer. Probably his interest had begun before he came to Oxford, but his Oxford experiences no doubt furthered it. The theme surfaces again, for instance, more than thirty years later after Eliot has been reading John Layard on life in the New Hebrides and writes of how:

It is obvious that among the more primitive communities the several activities of culture are inextricably interwoven. The Dyak who spends the better part of a season in shaping, carving and painting his barque of the peculiar design required for the annual ritual of head-hunting, is exercising several cultural activities at once - of art and religion, as well as of amphibious warfare.⁹

⁸ From 'Mr. Apollinax' in *Collected Poems 1909-1962* by T. S. Eliot, copyright 1936 by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., copyright © 1963, 1964 by T. S. Eliot. Reprinted by permission of the publisher. Reprinted also by permission of Faber and Faber Ltd from *Collected Poems 1909-1962* by T. S. Eliot (1969).

⁹ Reprinted by permission of Faber and Faber Ltd from *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* (1948: repr. London: Faber and Faber 1962) by T. S. Eliot, p.24.

If Eliot's longlasting interest in 'primitive' cultural practices as part of a society, and as patterns underlying 'society' in his own day, was in evidence in his Oxford career, then so were other of his less peaceable concerns. As well as sections on 'The Killing of Women', 'The Subjection of Wives', and a passage (II, 592) on the general religious veneration of thunder, Westermarck's book had lengthy considerations of 'Cannibalism' and 'Homicide in General'. Eliot's study of such themes may have formed a dubious apprenticeship for a future employee of Lloyds Bank, but it furnished him with material which might be of interest to the poet who would write *Sweeney Agonistes* with its

Every man has to, needs to, wants to
Once in a lifetime do a girl in¹⁰

and who would, in *The Family Reunion*, deal with a man obsessed by the thought that he had murdered his wife. Incipient in the reader of Westermarck at Merton was the Eliot who would in 1939 accompany Virginia Woolf to a London fancy dress party while wearing the costume of a fellow Englishman of American origin, a physician called Doctor Crippen.¹¹

In his Oxford correspondence, as in parts of the private nonsense epic, 'King Bolo and His Big Black Queen', Eliot parodied anthropological discourse. Immediately before arriving in Oxford he had written to Conrad Aiken on 30 September 1914 of his fear of boredom there, and had used the Frazerian image of a man whose corpse has been cut up into bits and who remains to see if the pieces may sprout.¹² This image would become the lines of *The Waste Land*,

'That corpse you planted last year in your garden,
'Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?'¹³

¹⁰ From 'Sweeney Agonistes' in *Collected Poems 1909-1962* by T.S. Eliot, copyright 1936 by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., copyright © 1963, 1964 by T.S.Eliot. Reprinted by permission of the publisher. Reprinted also by permission of Faber and Faber Ltd from *Collected Poems 1909-1962* by T.S.Eliot (1969).

¹¹ See *Leave the Letters Till We're Dead, The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Vol. VI: 1936-1941*, London: The Hogarth Press 1980, p. 313, letter to Elizabeth Bowen [29 January 1939].

¹² Eliot's letters to Aiken written at this time are in the Henry E. Huntington Library, California.

¹³ From 'The Waste Land' in *Collected Poems 1909-1962* by T.S.Eliot, copyright 1936 by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., copyright © 1963, 1964 by T.S.Eliot. Reprinted by permission of the publisher. Reprinted also by permission of Faber and Faber Ltd from *Collected Poems 1909-1962* by T.S.Eliot (1969).

Eliot's Oxford themes of prettiness and death through boredom were to reappear years later in *Sweeney Agonistes* where again Westermarck's topics of murder and cannibalism are recalled in the 'Fragment of an Agon':

SWEENEY: I'll carry you off
To a cannibal isle.
DORIS: You'll be the cannibal!
SWEENEY: You'll be the missionary!
You'll be my little seven stone missionary!
I'll gobble you up. I'll be the cannibal.¹⁴

Sweeney Agonistes combines anthropology and jazz. The play is full of popular notions of 'savage' life; its sources are combined in a complex fashion. But it had an immediate and scholarly anthropological stimulus. As *Sweeney Agonistes* combines modern urban and primitive life, so Eliot had made this combination earlier in his prose when in 1922, writing about his enthusiasm for the city music hall of Marie Lloyd, he suddenly switches to a theme at first sight far removed from London life.

The working man who went to the music-hall and saw Marie Lloyd and joined in the chorus was himself performing part of the act; he was engaged in that collaboration of the audience with the artist which is necessary in all art and most obviously in dramatic art. He will now go to the cinema, where his mind is lulled by continuous senseless music and continuous action too rapid for the brain to act upon, and will receive, without giving, in that same listless apathy with which the middle and upper classes regard any entertainment of the nature of art. He will also have lost some of his interest in life. Perhaps this will be the only solution. In an interesting essay in the volume of *Essays on the Depopulation of Melanesia*, the psychologist W. H. R. Rivers adduced evidence which has led him to believe that the natives of that unfortunate archipelago are dying out principally for the reason that the 'Civilization' forced upon them has deprived them of all interest in life. They are dying from pure boredom.¹⁴

Eliot goes on to foresee a future where 'the population of the entire civilized world rapidly follows the fate of the Melanesians'. His important notion of 'collaboration' in art owes much to his reading about the primitive ceremonies which he believed to lie at its origins and, in particular, at the origins of drama. In this prose piece the life of the Melanesians prior to the coming of 'civilized' men is seen as far preferable to the situation produced by contact with 'Civilization'. Eliot's passage is surprisingly Rousseauesque, and one wonders what his teacher at

¹⁴ Reprinted by permission of Faber and Faber Ltd from 'Marie Lloyd' in *Selected Essays* by T.S.Eliot, pp. 458-9.

Harvard, that fierce opponent of Rousseau, Irving Babbitt, would have made of it. But the poetic correlative of the prose speculations is very different in tone, showing life on the supposed 'paradise island' to be every bit as frighteningly boring as life in the city. Though the correspondences between 'Marie Lloyd' and *Sweeney Agonistes* have been hinted at by Herbert Howarth,¹⁵ the effect is very different:

SONG BY KLIPSTEIN AND KRUMPACKER

SNOW AND SWARTS AS BEFORE

My little island girl
 My little island girl
 I'm going to stay with you
 And we won't worry what to do
 We won't have to catch any trains
 And we won't go home when it rains
 We'll gather hibiscus flowers
 For it won't be minutes but hours
 For it won't be hours but years
 And the morning
 And the evening
 And noontide
 And night
 Morning
 Evening
 Noontime
 Night

diminuendo {

DORIS: That's not life, that's no life
 Why I'd just as soon be dead.

SWEENEY: That's what life is. Just is

DORIS: What is?

What's that life is?

SWEENEY: Life is death.¹⁶

This is far less 'Romantic' writing. The statistical tables of the volume of Melanesian Essays emphasised to Eliot that, as he wrote in *Sweeney Agonistes*,

That's all the facts when you come to brass tacks:
 Birth, and copulation, and death,¹⁶

but the matching of sophisticated urban life with primitive culture, of 'civilized' with 'savage' boredom also looks back with bitter irony to Westermarck's title *The Origin and Development of the Moral Ideas* whose themes persist in the fragments of the play which Eliot wrote about eight years after his stay in Oxford.

If Westermarck's book made a contribution to Eliot's thinking,

¹⁵ Herbert Howarth, *Notes on Some Figures Behind T.S. Eliot*, London: Chatto and Windus 1965, p. 239.

it also seems to have contributed at least one odd item to his vocabulary. This Westermarckian word is 'ju-ju' which Eliot used, in the context of the bringing of thunder, in a review of books by Herbert Read and Ramon Fernandez in 1926.¹⁶ This word 'ju-ju' is used on various occasions by Westermarck, as when, in his section on 'The Killing of Women', he quotes from Moor and Roupell on the people of Great Benin who, when there was too much rain, would pray to the king

to make juju, and sacrifice to stop the rain. Accordingly a woman was taken, a prayer made over her, and a message saluting the rain god put in her mouth, and then she was clubbed to death and put up in the execution tree so that the rain might see....¹⁷

Of course, it would be wrong to attach too much importance to Eliot's reading of Westermarck in Oxford in 1915, since Eliot's poetry is a palimpsest of sources and influences, but it is of some interest to be aware of the poet's previously unrecorded familiarity with the work of the great Finnish scholar, and of its repercussions. Eliot's time in Oxford was a bridging period between his writing at Harvard on primitive ritual and his later published and private writings on anthropology. Eliot's year in Oxford also contributed towards his continuing interest not only in the anthropological material held by Oxford libraries, but also his interest in material produced by Oxford anthropologists. The first of those whom he had read was E.B.Tylor, and he read Oxford anthropology at least until the time when he praised 'a valuable article by Professor Evans-Pritchard on "Social Anthropology" in *Blackfriars* for November 1946'.¹⁸ Here Eliot read about *The Golden Bough*, the Torres Straits Expedition, Durkheim, the Melanesians, and other subjects with which he was already familiar. But he also read of the changes which had taken place since the anthropology of his youth. Evans-Pritchard wrote that:

The respective spheres of social science and moral philosophy are well defined and the anthropologist has the double advantage that he can pride himself on his single-minded pursuit of truth and can shift all responsibility from his own shoulders - for judgment on the moral philosopher and for action on the man of affairs. It is not so simple in reality, nor so convenient. When dealing with such practices as polygamy, the levirate, cannibalism, magic, and

¹⁶ 'Books of the Quarter', *Criterion*, Vol. IV, no. 4 (1926), p.757.

¹⁷ E. Westermarck, *The Origin and Development of the Moral Ideas*, London: Macmillan 1906, 1908 (2 vols.), i, p. 444.

¹⁸ Reprinted by permission of Faber and Faber Ltd from *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* by T.S.Eliot, p. 69.

so on, which are remote from live issues in our own society, it is easy for anthropologists to be detached observers and recorders, but as soon as what they describe hinges on religious and political issues in modern Europe they are never entirely impartial, though, naturally, they refrain from deliberately distorting facts or drawing biased conclusions.¹⁹

Eliot's poet's mind had allowed him to see cannibalism imaginatively as not so far removed from his own society. Anthropology appealed to him because of its wide scope, and it helped him to adopt the panoramic vision which led him to write that:

the actual religion of no European people has ever been purely Christian, or purely anything else. There are always bits and traces of more primitive faiths, more or less absorbed....²⁰

In Oxford in 1914-15 the elements of the man of action, the academic, and the creative writer were combined in different proportions in T.E. Lawrence, Charles Ellwood, and T.S. Eliot. If it was Eliot who was to make the greatest impact on our culture, then part of the reason lay in his own innate gifts. But another important part of the reason lay in his discipline and training, one area of which was in anthropological study. It was Eliot who most fully appreciated and criticized the meaning of the concepts latent in Westermarck's title, *The Origin and Development of the Moral Ideas*.

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¹⁹ 'Social Anthropology', *Blackfriars*, November 1946, p. 413.

²⁰ Reprinted by permission of Faber and Faber Ltd from *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* by T.S. Eliot, pp. 31-2.