HENRY HOME, LORD KAMES (1696-1782)

Lord Kames was the son of an impoverished Scottish Laird of Kames, and he had a hard struggle to work his way to obtain an education and then to make a reputation at the Scottish bar; but by his brilliant mind and dogged persistence he reached a judgeship, taking his title as a Law Lord from his parental home.

If we may trust what his biographers have written he was critically pertinacious to the point of wearing his correspondents out. We are told also that he was something of a Lothario and bon viveur; and if only half we read about him were true we might still have to conclude that he was not an amiable person.

In his early days he had been a Jacobite and Episcopalian. As far as religion is concerned I suppose he may later be regarded, like Ferguson, as some sort of Deist, and in his writings there are frequent references to 'the Author of our Being', 'the finger of God', 'Providential care', and so forth. He appears to have been very devout. However, his attempt to defend the Christian faith, or some aspects of it (Essays on the Principles of Morality and Natural Religion, 1751), against Hume was not very successful and proved to be a boomerang for, ironically, it brought against him a charge of infidelity. Besides being lawyer, author and polemicist, Kames was a farmer who took great interest in his property, introducing new methods in farming, much to the disgust of the local farmers. Also, he corresponded on almost every subject - physics, physiology, natural history, literary criticism with all the leading intellectuals in Edinburgh and beyond. A versatile man, he had all these many interests, and he was a prolific writer, employing always an emanuencis; so prolific that his rival Law Lord, Montboddo, said to him in sarcastic wit that he (Montboddo) could not read as fast as he (Kames) could write. His writings, the more important of which are listed in the bibliography at the end of this essay, are of considerable interest to the student of the social history of 18th century Scotland, but the only one which has much relevance for the history of sociological thought is his Sketches of the History of Man (1774) - I have used the three volume edition of 1807. He intended to write a History of Man but he found the subject too vast, and he too old, to complete it, so it was reduced to the more modest Sketches.

In some ways it may be said that all these Scottish moral philosophers wrote the same books. They started off with the idea that a study of man must be a study of social institutions - of men in groups: so, says Kames, man is endued with an appetite for society, no less than the appetite he has for food, for in a solitary state he is helpless and forlorn. Then, Kames' book, like those written by his contemporaries who were interested in social institutions purports to be a history of man in his progress from savagery to the highest civilization and improvement. This was the aim of all the philosopher-sociologists of the period, and in much the same words. And like them he employed for the purpose of historical reconstruction, the comparative method, Dugald Stewart's 'Theoretic or Conjectural History', to which he gave unqualified approval.

The book starts off with a discussion, much in the air at the time, of whether there are different races of men or just one race with such differences as might be attributed to climate, soil, food or other external causes. Kames, although he was strongly influenced by the celebrated Montesquieu, as he acknowledges, and so was prepared to allow climate to have some effect on character, comes down decisively in favour of the diversity of races, of what today we would, I suppose, call innate racial characteristics. He attempts to support his contention by a hotch-potch of information culled from travellers' reports from all over the world (American Indians, Melanesians, Polynesians, Lapps, Tartars, Chinese, etc.) and from classical Latin authors - much of which might fairly be said to be rubbish. He was certainly credulous and his reasoning highly conjectural; but we must not perhaps judge an author by what we know today, ex post facto. It is true, he says, that the Spanish of Southern America have lost their vigour, that the offspring of Europeans in Batavia soon degenerate, and that Portugese long settled on the sea-coast of Congo retain scarce the appearance of men - but neither climate nor any other extraneous influence can account for fundamental differences in dispositions or character, e.g. courageous and cowardly, pacific and warlike - differences in what today some people would call 'ethos'. Such being his view, it would seem to me that it was not very consistent of him to accept the Biblical story of the Tower of Babel to account for the great number and variety of languages; the alternative, that 'God created many pairs of the human race' (p. 59), he would not accept.

Like all other writers of the time on social institutions his basic criteria for a classification of types of society are bionomic, modes of production, hunting and collecting, pastoral, and agricultural; and like Ferguson, Condorcet and others, he makes (Vol. 1, Chap. 2) the point that as population increases various social consequences follow. Then there is the same emphasis as we find in the same writers on the significance of property in the development of civilization. 'Among the senses inherent in man, the sense of property, is eminent' (Vol. 1, p. 91) and this sense increases in the advance from savagery to higher types of culture; and desire for property is the mother of many arts: 'without private property there would be no industry; and without industry, men would remain savages for ever' (Vol. 1, p. 97). But property combined with opulence lead to decadence and depopulation: 'cookery depopulates like a pestilence....' (Vol. 1, p. 88). There is a good deal about the development of modes of exchange from barter to money.

These three volumes can be rather tedious reading, almost as tedious as The Golden Bough, an erudite catalogue of customs, many entries being cited on dubious authority. I give one quotation as an example. 'The female Caribbeans and Brasilians, are no less fond of ornament than the males. Hottentot ladies strive to outdo each other in adorning their crosses, and the bag that holds their pipe and tobacco: European ladies are not more vain of their silks and embroideries. Women in Lapland are much addicted to finery. They wear broad girdles, upon which hang chains and rings without end, commonly made of tin, sometimes of silver, weighing perhaps twenty pounds. The Greenlanders are nasty and slovenly, eat with their dogs, make food of the vermin that make food of them, seldom or never wash themselves; and yet

the women, who make some figure among the men, are gaudy in their dress. Their chief ornaments are pendants at their ears, with glass beads of various colours.... The Negroes of the kingdom of Ardrah in Guinea have made a considerable progress in police, and in the art of living. Their women carry dress and finery to an extravagance. They are clothed with loads of the finest satins and chintzes, and are adorned with a profusion of gold. In a sultry climate, they gratify vanity at the expense of ease. Among the inland Negroes, who are more polished than those on the sea-coast, the women, besides domestic concerns, sow, plant, and reap. A man however suffers in the esteem of his neighbours, if he permit his wives to toil like slaves, while he is indulging in ease (Vol. 1, pp. 434-5).

Nevertheless, one may say, in reference to the above excerpt, that in spite of the inadequacy of his sources and of much sententious and dogmatic moralizing, Kames deserves credit for the attention he paid to the position of women and 'the gradual progress of women, from their low state in savage tribes, to their elevated state in civilized nations' (Vol. 1, p. 404). However, the progress of women is only one of his topics. Like Adam Ferguson he wrote about every topic on which he wished to air his opinions. I mention just a few headings: Property, Commerce, Arts, Manners, Luxury, Forms of Government, War and Peace, Finances, the Army, Aristotle's Logic, Theology.

It would be time ill-spent to discuss in detail all he wrote on so many topics, but one may be quoted, showing again the influence of Montesquieu, which dominated thinking about social institutions in England in the 18th century, that of government. There is the familiar discussion in terms of democratic, monarchical, despotic, and so on. Kames tells us 'of all governments, democracy is the most turbulent: despotism, which benumbs the mental faculties, and relaxes every spring of action, is in the opposite extreme. Mixed governments, whether monarchial or republican, stand in the middle: they promote activity, but seldom any dangerous excess' (Vol. 2, p. 61). Again 'Democracy is contradictory to nature, because the whole people govern: despotism is not less so, because government rests in a single person. A republic, or a limited monarchy is the best form; because in these every man has an opportunity to act the part that nature destined him for,' (Vol. 2, p. 75).

Like others before and after him Kames had, since he was aiming to write an account of social development, to make a classification of social types so as to relate these various topics to them, which, like the others, he did on criteria of production and productive relations; and it is difficult to see what other criteria he could have used. Moreover, they were strictly relevant in that is evident that other social and cultural differences must, at any rate to a large extent, be determined by them.

So 'In the hunter-state, men are wholly employed upon the procuring of food, clothing, habitation, and other neccessaries; and have no time nor zeal for the studying conveniences. The ease of the shepheard-state affords both time and inclination for useful arts; which are greatly promoted by numbers who are relieved by agriculture from bodily labour; the soil by gradual improvements in husbandry, affords plenty with less labour than

at first; and the surplus hands are employed, first, in useful arts, and, next, in those of amusement. Arts accordingly make the quickest progress in a fertile soil, which produces plenty with little labour. Arts flourished early in Egypt and Chaldea, countries extremely fertile,' (Vol. 1, p. 128).

We are not here to praise or blame Lord Kames, but merely to speak of him as a typical figure in that 18th century Edinburgh circle who were profoundly interested in the development of social institutions and who certainly had great influence on the development of social anthropological thought, as may be seen, I believe in the writings of the two famous Scottish anthropologists McLennan and Frazer.

In conclusion I would add that - though he often broke the rule himself - he laid down a very sound directive for anthropologists to follow: that one should never draw general conclusions from particular facts. Dominated by empirical fieldwork many English-speaking anthropologists have forgotten this advice, which is different from saying that we should not try to see the general in the particular.

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