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"When the Monkey-Type Stopped and the Human Began": Lorimer Fison on the Bottom Rung of the Ladder of Human Evolution

Mark Francillon

Lorimer Fison

This mammal, 'tis said, had a pedigree too.
The marsupial order here comes into view.
Se we'll trace him, I think, to a big kangaroo.

This kangaroo's sire was most likely a bird
Or an ornithorhyncus would not be absurd;
Then to frogs & strange fishes we're backwards referred.

Thus far Darwin says. But the root of the tree,
What it was, when it came, & what caused it to be,
Is a puzzle to him quite as much as to me.

The text, from Fison's "Extracts Book" in the Fison Papers, Tippet Collection, St. Mark's Library (Canberra) is not dated, but on the evidence of adjacent entries would seem to be 1872 or 1873--at a point when Fison had not yet become seriously engaged in Morgan's project. The phrases bracketed above are alternative passages interlineated in the original manuscript. There is also a version of this (basically the same text, minus verses 2, 5, and 6), in Fison's unpublished manuscript, Study of Ancient Society (also in the Tippet Collection, but probably mid 1890s). A letter from Fison to Howitt, dated 5/20/1876 (Fison letterbook 5:64-65) offers a prose elaboration of his position:

I believe in Evolution. Only I don't believe in the Evolutionists. And moreover I cannot find proof that a number of successive stages forming an ascending series compels me to accept a lower than the lowest. There may have been--in all probability there was--a lower than the lowest I have yet seen, but was there a lower than that? Who can say? I see the upper part of a ladder reared against an adjoining building, & take it for granted that there are a number of rungs below the lowest which my window allows me to behold; but I know there is a foot to the ladder, & that the rungs end somewhere. . . Evolution must begin somewhere, & the farther back we push that somewhere the greater the wonders which lie within it, &, as it seems to me, the stronger the proof of Somebody (if on may so speak) behind it. An atom with the certainty of a Universe within it proves to me the existence of a God).

SOURCES FOR THE HISTORY OF ANTHROPOLOGY

I. Frederick Ward Putnam Papers-The papers of Ralph W. Dexter in the Kent State University Archives contain six boxes of important materials relating to the career of Frederick Ward Putnam, who was the subject of numerous short publications by Dexter during several decades before the latter's death. Among the Putnam materials are a cache of wonderful photos of Putnam, his family, and the houses they lived in; sketches, and letters (1858-60) from Putnam to his first wife, Adelaide, before they were married. There is also material (originally in the American Museum of Natural History Department of Anthropology, and transmitted to the Harvard University Archives in 1944) relating to Putnam's career at the AMNH. These include