



History of Anthropology Newsletter

Volume 1
Issue 2 *Spring 1974*

Article 5

1-1-1974

The Letters of Sir James Frazer: A Report of Research

Robert Ackerman

KEY

This chart omits articles written by Radcliffe-Brown, reviews of his books, and newsy items concerning such matters as his whereabouts. The chart includes references to him found in articles written by others, as well as citations found in book reviews written by others about books other than his own. This limitation was imposed in order to emphasize the degree to which he had intruded into the normal stream of thought of American anthropology.

- D Data--a brief reference citing data reported by Radcliffe-Brown.
 - T Theory--a brief reference citing some feature of Radcliffe-Brown's theoretical scheme, such as his functionalism or his attempt to locate natural laws behind society.
 - M Miscellaneous--a brief reference to Radcliffe-Brown which does not fall into either of the above categories.
 - X Extended general discussion--each shaded square represents approximately one-half page of discussion devoted to Radcliffe-Brown.
-

RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

THE LETTERS OF SIR JAMES FRAZER: A REPORT OF RESEARCH

Robert Ackerman

My interest in Frazer began in my dissertation (Columbia, 1969) on "The Cambridge Ritualists and the Origins of 'Myth Criticism'," a study of the group--Jane Harrison, Gilbert Murray, F.M. Cornford, and A.B. Cook--who first applied certain anthropological ideas to literary criticism, thereby initiating what has come to be known as "myth and ritual" criticism.¹ In the process of writing this multidisciplinary dissertation, which led me into classical scholarship, history of religion, and philosophy, I became absorbed in the so-called British rationalist anthropologists of the turn of the century, and it was a natural step to Frazer, the most considerable among them.

As the first step to an eventual biography, I am preparing an edition of his letters (with fellowship support from the ACLS for 1973-74). In such undertakings one must decide first whether one wishes to present every epistolary scrap (most appropriate for literary figures), or to make a selection. Because (as it turns out) Frazer was not a man who poured out his soul in his letters, and also because of the additional several years that would be required to be sure of having canvassed every possible source, I intend what might be described as a comprehensive selected edition.

I fortunately secured the cooperation of Trinity College, Cambridge, the holders of Frazer's copyrights for both published and unpublished writing. Beyond this, I have been the beneficiary of several happy facts: that Frazer's letters have survived in remarkably large numbers,

with the vast majority of them accessible in libraries; that the largest group by far, in the files of Macmillans, his publishers for fifty-five years, was recently donated to the British Museum; that Frazer's handwriting is clear, and that--good scholar that he was--he nearly always dated his letters. So far I have collected xerox copies of about a thousand letters, of which I estimate some two-thirds will be published.

To date there aren't many "bombshells." I have, however, turned up several letters that show Frazer, contrary to received opinion, expressing doubts about the comparative method. The main body of new material is of course biographical in character--and here the edition will be an extraordinarily valuable source, not only for Frazer but for those with whom he was frequently in touch, including Hartland, Roscoe, Haddon, and Malinowski. Although Frazer's ideas are acknowledged (even by those who think little of them) to have had powerful effects on the development of modern intellectual culture, especially on the literary side, his life remains little more than a blur. There have been two brief journalistic biographies by R.A. Downie (one of Sir Jame's last private secretaries), and a few reminiscences by the next generation of anthropologists (most notably by Malinowski), but Frazer's shyness and modesty, the redoubtable nature of Lady Frazer, and the precipitous decline in his reputation since the thirties seem effectively to have discouraged much work in this area.

I would appreciate information on the whereabouts of any Frazer letters, especially in relatively out-of-the-way libraries or in private hands, and would be glad to receive reprints or references concerning him. In return, I should be pleased to share my knowledge of Frazer, and/or his letters, with any who care to correspond (care of the English Department, Hamilton Hall, Columbia University, New York, NY 10027).

¹Cf. my "Some Letters of Cambridge Ritualists," Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies, 12 (1971), 113-136; "Jane Ellen Harrison: The Early Work," GRBS, 13 (1972), 209-230; "Writing about Writing about Myth" (review-article), Journal of the History of Ideas, 34 (1973), 147-155; "Verrall on Euripides' Suppliants 939ff," GRBS, 14 (1973), 103-108; "Frazer, Myth and Ritual," JHI, forthcoming; "Sir J.G. Frazer-A.E. Housman: A Relationship in Letters," GRBS, forthcoming.

RESEARCH NOTES:

(Although the initial response has been gratifying, we are sure from prior knowledge of what's going on that we have not received reports from everyone doing research in the history of anthropology. Over time we hope our coverage will become more complete. As we receive them, and as space permits, we plan to include brief reference to all research reports which indicate a clearly defined project in the history of anthropology, either here or under "Dissertations in Progress." We offer our apologies to several whose reports were postponed to this issue, and to Drs. Beckham and Frantz, whose names were misspelled in the first listing.)