

Race and Anthropology

Robert Burroughs

Nottingham Trent University

The Bible Society Cleanings.
Various source media, 19th Century UK Periodicals
DECEMBER, 1896.



IN CENTRAL AMERICA.
Native Indians at Home.



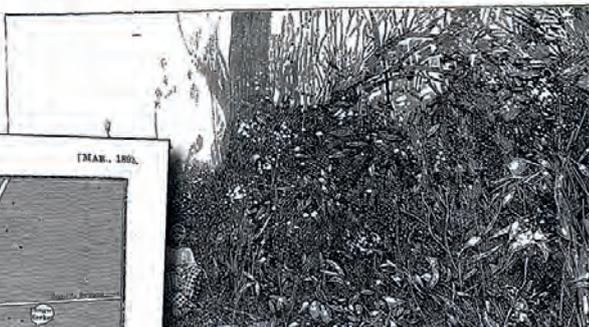
THE TOURISTS—T. W. HARKER AND H. GREEN.

A CYCLING TOUR IN SOUTH AFRICA.

By THOMAS WOODVILLE HARKER.

ii. HE vrou is indeed the helpmate of her husband in every way, would be useless. I do believe the American poet at some time or other must have had visions in his dreams of this portion of the globe, for has he not written:—

Baptisms at San Salvador. [FEBRUARY, 1899.



JANUARY 1, 1890.] THE MISSIONARY HERALD.
CALABAR COLLEGE, KINGSTON, JAMAICA.
THE following graphic letter from S. B. Burton, Esq. F.R.G.S., of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, will be read with great interest:—
"Newcastle-on-Tyne, December, 1894.
"DEAR MR. BAYNES,—The request
Royal Mail s.s. *Eden* on July 18th last.
"On the twelfth day out we passed

The word “race” meant different things to different people in the nineteenth century. In its broadest sense, “race” referred to the common ancestry of a group of humans who shared characteristics that had developed over time. This loose definition permitted the term to be used to describe groups on scales ranging from families and clans to classes, nations and cultures, to the major geographical categories of mankind. Many nineteenth-century references to race reflect this ambiguity (Lorimer, 1996, 13-19). From around the 1850s, nevertheless, race increasingly was defined according to scientific theories of physiological difference, in particular in skin colour, among human groups. One of the motors of this change in the understanding of race was the nascent science of anthropology. Traditionally, anthropology has been regarded as a formal academic science of the twentieth century. Before the emergence of the professional anthropological field-worker in the early twentieth century, however, scientists with training in disciplines such as archaeology, physiology and philology, as well as philosophers and lay enthusiasts, produced theories pertaining to the language systems, social and cultural organisation, mental capacity and physiology of peoples of Europe, Africa, Asia and the Middle East, Australia and the Pacific Islands, and the Americas. For those who had not travelled to the regions that they studied, this research entailed reading and interpreting accounts of foreign places by explorers, missionaries, military and naval personnel, colonial administrators and settlers, and freed slaves. Such information was located, and subsequently discussed, in books and periodicals that ranged in purpose from the scientific to the evangelical. Of course, not all of this material was of equal anthropological merit. It was not until 1874 that the Anthropological Institute issued its first

guidelines on scientific research ‘in uncivilised lands’. Before – and even after – then, much lay commentary was superficial at best. Even so, this diffuse and uneven field of writing formed the foundations upon which professional anthropology in Britain was built, and theories of race were advanced and contested’.

The first British association devoted to research of an anthropological character was the Ethnological Society of London. This body was founded in 1843 as an adjunct to the Aborigines Protection Society, a humanitarian organisation with roots in the evangelical campaign against the slave trade. The Ethnological Society inherited these religious moorings. Drawing primarily upon philological analyses of the Indo-European family of languages, its leading member J.C. Prichard argued in support of the Bible that humankind had descended from a single common ancestor. For Prichard and his followers, racial difference was evidence of variety within the singular “family of man”. “Man” had been created in idealised form, as a white-skinned, moral being, from which most races had deteriorated, principally under the adverse effects of climate. Favourable environmental conditions meant that humans had retained their purest state in the white skin and “civilisation” of Europeans. As it complimented the Enlightenment belief in unity of the human race and consequent philanthropic endeavours of the humanitarian and religious societies, Prichard’s thesis was generally upheld in the Aborigines Protection Society’s *Annual Reports* and *Colonial Intelligencer*, or *Aborigines Friend*, as well as in various missionary journals including the *Church Missionary Gleaner*, *Voice of Pity for South America*, *Friend of India* and *Missionary Herald*. For Prichard, in turn, humanitarian and

missionary organisations enabled the ethnologists' work of 'record[ing] the disappearing races', the better to understand humankind in all its variation (Prichard, 57).

Even within this statement of Prichard's, however, there are signs that the scientific aim of ethnologists to record 'the disappearing races' was not entirely at one with the humanitarians' goal to prevent their disappearance. And from 1863 the evangelical grounding of anthropology came under fire from a breakaway faction of the Ethnological Society. In that year James Hunt founded the Anthropological Society of London. Hunt is thought to have severed his ties with Prichard's society in protest against the publication of a woodcut illustration of freed slaves in Sierra Leone, which accompanied an article in the *Transactions of the Ethnological Society of 1863* (Stocking, 1971, 376). As Rainger points out, Hunt's opposition to the romanticising depiction of Africans in the engraving reflected an emergent ideological schism in British anthropology (Rainger, 52-6). The middle decades of the nineteenth century witnessed a recession in humanitarian and religious commitment, and a related rise in conservative responses to "colonial questions" including the suppression of "piracy" in Sarawak, the Indian revolution, the Maori Wars, the Morant Bay uprising and its suppression, as well as American emancipation. New findings in the fields of philology, comparative anatomy, phrenology, archaeology and anthropometry, plus Darwin's theory of evolution, all suggested the need to rethink the ethnologists' faith in the biblical account of humankind's origins. At the same time, the race theories of Carlyle ('Occasional Discourse on the Negro Question' [1849]²), Knox (*The*

Races of Men [1850]), Nott and Giddon (*Types of Mankind* [1854]), and Gobineau (*Essay on the Inequality of Human Races* [1856]) asserted with unprecedented conviction the essential dissimilarity between human races, and the superiority of European over non-European races, in particular Africans.

The Anthropological Society claimed to practice a more empirically and theoretically rigorous brand of anthropology, which, as it disassociated itself from religious institutions, shied from no subject of inquiry. Its avowed distrust of missionaries and exclusion of women from society meetings was reasoned on the grounds of its objective to enable frank discussion of sexual practices in foreign cultures, among other subjects deemed taboo. Many of its members also assumed an openly atheistic outlook. Furthermore, and despite its pretensions to scientific objectivity, the society was overtly political, giving its support to the Confederates' war against U.S. emancipation, among other contentious subjects. Yet the most significant intervention of the Anthropological Society was its harnessing of the new theories of race actively to confront evangelical notions of the oneness of human kind, and its distinction from the rest of the animal kingdom. Hunt's touchstone article 'On the Negro's Place in Nature' (1863) argued that Europeans and Africans were not of a single origin. Hunt drew upon anatomical measurements of African bodies, in particular craniums, to claim that blacks were more closely related to apes than they were to Europeans. He also employed a variety of historical and philosophical "evidence" to assert "the negro's" failure to achieve in the realms of science and art. He concluded that Africans must be classified as a distinct species from

Europeans. It is worth noting that this article dovetailed with others in the annals of the Anthropological Society, such as L. Owen Pike's 'On the Physical Characteristics of the English People' (1865), which used the same scientific and cultural approach to promote notions of inborn English superiority. Theories of other races have always served to define the self and its racial identity (see Lorimer, 1978); this is nowhere more transparent than in Pike's essay.

Hunt and his small but influential band of supporters argued that racial difference was fixed. They held that non-European peoples were not morally and culturally wayward, as had most ethnologists, but that morality and "civilised culture" were hereditarily alien to such peoples. Discussions as to the singular (monogenetic) or multiple (polygenetic) origins of humanity predate the mid-nineteenth-century period – indeed, much of Prichard's writings are dialectically pitted against polygenist theories of the late eighteenth century (Young, 7-10). Nevertheless, the Anthropologists' polygenetic thesis dominated mid-century anthropological debate as it posed a fundamental challenge to the ethnologists' account of racial difference, and the orthodox Christian worldview that it supported. The ethnologists responded by branding their opponents as modish, sensationalist and dangerously atheistic. (The latter criticism might well have been coveted and embraced by some of its recipients, including the explorers Richard F. Burton and Winwood Reade.) Because the Anthropological Society published the views of its critics as well as its members and supporters, the various debates that it generated may be examined in depth by consultation of its *Anthropological Review*, *Memoirs*, *Proceedings*, and

the short-lived *Popular Magazine of Anthropology*, all of which were edited by Hunt. These publications demonstrate the breadth of subjects and intellectual disciplines upon which the discussion impinged. They further show that while it has proven useful for historians (and for the purposes of this essay) retrospectively to construct two camps of thought around the controversy regarding mankind's monogenetic or polygenetic origins, a range of viewpoints were in fact contained within these groups³.

By 1870, after numerous heated deliberations, the Ethnological and Anthropological societies found enough common ground to merge into the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland. One subject upon which many anthropologists agreed was the validity of Darwin's thesis. Many ethnologists had, like their counterparts, found truth in Darwin, and they too adapted his ideas to their own needs. After Darwin, some of Prichard's followers conceded that the descent of humankind had taken place over a much longer timescale than was suggested in the Bible, and that it could not be so clearly distinguished from that of other species as earlier ethnologists had claimed. Rather than being different species, however, it was maintained that humans had developed from a single origin according to climatic and geographical influences into different "types" – a word which, as Young has suggested, perhaps provided a safer alternative to "races" and "species" (Young, 13-14). Carrying the same underlying belief that European "civilisation" represented a more advanced state of existence than that of the "uncivilised" or "primitive" regions of the globe, Darwinian advocates of the monogenetic thesis developed a hierarchical

conception of human development which pitted world cultures at different phases of progress. Australian Aboriginals and Sub-Saharan Africans routinely occupied the lowest echelons of the evolutionary hierarchy, and Europeans the highest. This was to replot human variation along the axis of time (Stocking, 1987, 76).

While polygenetic theories remained residually influential – anthropologists would continue to wonder whether different human types were in fact separate species well into the twentieth century – the new, socio-cultural evolutionary anthropology rapidly prevailed owing in large part to the work of James G. Frazer and E.B. Tylor. If the ideological permeations of its hierarchical understanding of difference is clear in retrospect, it is worth remembering that the Anthropological Institute was created to return anthropology to the realm of “pure science” following its excursion into religious and political discourses in the 1860s (Rainger, 70). Frazer’s opus *The Golden Bough* (1890) was intended to be politically benign in its interpretation of the cultures that it situated at the bottom of the ladder of progress. Nevertheless, evolutionary thinking served latently in the intellectual justification of colonialism as an historical inevitability. In *The Descent of Man* (1871), Darwin himself posited that ‘[e]xtinction follows chiefly from the competition of tribe with tribe, and race with race ... [W]hen civilised nations come into contact with barbarians the struggle is short’ (qtd. in Young, 13). Fatalistic reckoning such as this helped to create the conditions in which the extermination of the Tasmanians by British colonialists could be regretted and censured, but not prevented, by politicians and colonial administrators (Stocking, 1987,

275-83; Lindqvist, 123). It also gave added impetus to the science of eugenics, which promoted the improvement of bloodlines to stave off degeneration through interbreeding with “lower” races.

At the same time, socio-cultural evolutionism upheld the evangelical project of elevating “lower” races through Christian instruction, and the humanitarian endeavour to save the same groups from destruction by their encounter with European colonialism. These goals were often intertwined. In the first decade of the twentieth century, for instance, Baptist missionaries in the Congo Free State such as Rev. John H. Weeks used the *Missionary Herald* to document cultures of the Upper Congo that were under threat from the colonial regime of King Leopold II. It was also in this period that intellectuals from the colonies, such as Jomo Kenyatta, a student of social anthropology at the London School of Economics and later author of the pioneering study of Kikuyu culture *Facing Mount Kenya* (1938), too would employ anthropological discourses of race to assert the integrity of non-western cultures (Kenyatta; see Gikandi). In different ways, the likes of Weeks and Kenyatta necessitated the development of newly relativistic understandings of cultural difference in British anthropology of the early twentieth century. Nevertheless, as Young has argued, it would be unsound to conclude that the cultural basis of anthropology of the twentieth century formed a decisive break from the scientific racial determinism of the nineteenth. After all, as this essay has shown, nineteenth-century anthropological discourses of race were always loaded with cultural assumptions, and they were also constantly subject to debate. In these respects, they have more in common with

contemporary cultural analyses of race than we tend to acknowledge (Young, 27).

NOTES

¹ Stocking's *Victorian Anthropology* (1987) remains the definitive examination of nineteenth-century anthropological institutions. Bolt (1971), Lorimer (1978), Stepan (1982), Rich (1986) and Lorimer (1996) explore constructions of race in the nineteenth century. Asad (1973), Thomas (1994), Young (1995) and Pels and Salemnick (1999) elucidate anthropology's relation to colonialism.

² This was republished in 1853 with the more abrasive title, 'Occasional Discourse on the Nigger Question'.

³ For a fuller discussion of the Anthropological Society's publications see Young, 139-41.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Asad, Talal (ed.). *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter* [1973]. New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1995.

Bolt, Christine. *Victorian Attitudes to Race*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971.

Gikandi, Simon. "Cultural Translation and the African Self: A (Post)colonial Case Study", *Interventions* 3:3 (2001). pp. 355-75.

Gunn, Simon. *The Public Culture of the Victorian Middle Class*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000.

Hunt, James. "On the Negro's Place in Nature", *Memoirs of the Anthropological Society of London I* (1863-4). pp. 1-64.

Kenyatta, Jomo. *Facing Mount Kenya: The Tribal Life of the Gikuyu*. London: Secker and Warburg, 1938.

Huggins, Mike. *The Victorians and Sport*. London: Hambledon and London, 2004.

Lindqvist, Sven (tr. Tate, Joan). 'Exterminate all the Brutes!'. London: Granta, 1996.

Lorimer, Douglas A. *Colour, Class and the Victorians: English attitudes to the Negro in the mid-nineteenth century*. Leicester: Leicester

University Press, 1978.

--- 'Race, science and culture: historical continuities and discontinuities, 1850-1914', in Shearer West (ed.) *The Victorians and Race*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 1996.

Pels, Peter, and Oscar Salemnick (eds). *Colonial Subjects: Essays on the Practical History of Anthropology*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999.

Pike, L. Owen. "On the Physical Characteristics of the English People", *Memoirs of the Anthropological Society of London II* (1865). pp. 153-88.

Prichard, J.C., letter to Thomas Hodgkin, 20/5/39, *Extracts from the Papers and Proceedings of the Aborigines Protection Society II* (1839). pp. 56-8.

Rainger, Ronald. "Race, Politics and Science: The Anthropological Society of London in the 1860s", *Victorian Studies* 22:1 (1978). pp. 51-70.

Rich, Paul B. *Race and Empire in British Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

Stepan, Nancy. *The Idea of Race in Science: Great Britain, 1800-1960*. London: Macmillan, 1982.

Stocking Jr., George W. *Race, Culture, and Evolution: Essays in the History of Anthropology*. London: Collier-Macmillan, 1968.

--- "What's in a Name? The Origins of the Royal Anthropological Institute, 1837-1871", *Man: The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 6 (1971). pp. 369-90.

--- *Victorian Anthropology*. New York: The Free Press, 1987.

Thomas, Nicholas. *Colonialism's Culture: Anthropology, Travel and Government*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994.

Young, Robert J.C. *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*. London: Routledge, 1995.

CITATION

Burroughs, Robert: "Race and Anthropology." *19th Century UK Periodicals*. Detroit: Gale, 2008.

© Cengage Learning 2008

**REQUEST A
FREE TRIAL**

**CONTACT YOUR
REPRESENTATIVE**

**FIND OUT MORE
ON OUR WEBSITE**

