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William Robertson Smith and J. G. Frazer: 'Genuit Frazerum'?

Robert Ackerman

In 1911, summarizing recent developments in mythography, the French classical anthropologist Salomon Reinach (1858–1932) remarked that a sufficient epitaph for William Robertson Smith might be '*genuit Frazerum*'.[1] By 1911 enough time had passed since Smith's death to permit a reasonably dispassionate appraisal of his work, and Reinach was a competent critic of both Smith and Frazer, so I don't think we can dismiss the phrase as merely an example of the French fondness for epigram. We never expect an epigram to tell the whole truth, but instead to illuminate its subject in an unexpected way, which I hope to show that it does. I shall argue that Reinach may have spoken truer than he knew.

There can be no doubt that Smith did indeed beget Frazer in the figurative sense as an anthropologist–I am, of course, using 'anthropologist' as it was understood in Smith and Frazer's day–in that he initiated Frazer into a field about which the latter knew very little and acted as his mentor until, it might be argued, the pupil overtook the master. As long as Smith lived, they remained the closest of friends, seeing one another often and going for long walks and talks. When Smith's health broke down early in 1890 from the tuberculosis that would kill him four years later, Frazer visited him frequently, assisted him in every way he could, and after his death helped J. S. Black see the revised edition of *The Religion of the Semites* through the press. All that is either well known or obvious. But what I want try to delineate is what Smith may have meant to Frazer imaginatively and psychologically, which means that I shall describe some important moments in that relationship, and then engage in some psychological speculation, with all the difficulties that implies.

At this point I must insert a minimum of what is now fashionably called 'back-story'. Smith, in the articles 'Angel' and 'Bible' in the ninth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, presented an epitome of a century of German

[1] Salomon Reinach, 'The Growth of Mythological Study', *Quarterly Review* 215 (October 1911), 423–41; '*genuit Frazerum*' occurs on p. 438. The phrase would have greater force if we knew whether Reinach actually knew Smith; he certainly knew Frazer, at least as a correspondent.

Higher Criticism, thereby scandalizing his co-religionists in the Free Church of Scotland, most of whom had barely heard of biblical criticism, and knew only that they didn't like it. Inevitably, some of those co-religionists preferred charges against him in what became the last serious heresy trials in Great Britain. I shall skip over the tortuous business of the trials themselves and Smith's resultant notoriety, and pick up the narrative with his appointment as Lord Almoner's reader in Arabic at Cambridge. As such, Smith was made a member of Trinity College in October 1883, and arrived in Cambridge at Christmas of that year. Happily, we have a full and detailed description by Frazer of his first meeting with Smith and its consequences, an account that is not only comprehensive but extraordinarily revealing.[2] The account exists because in 1897, three years after Smith's death, a friend, John F. White, wished to compose an appreciation of Smith and accordingly wrote to Frazer, among others, for information and reminiscences. Frazer was neither an introspective man nor one at all given to writing about his feelings, but White happened to approach him at a moment when he was close to exhaustion, having just seen the work of fourteen years (the six quarto volumes of *Pausanias's Description of Greece*) through the press. It may well have been authorial fatigue that caused him to let down his defences somewhat, but more importantly it must have been the force of the still poignant memory of his friend. Whatever it was, and most uncharacteristically, on 15 December 1897 Frazer responded at extraordinary length, in what is *by far* the longest we have of the several thousand of his extant letters. There are of course reminiscences of Smith by various hands, but none that I know has the immediacy of Frazer's. So even though we have no matching account from Smith's side, in this case something is a great deal better than nothing.

Before I offer extracts from this remarkable source, we need context. We must have something more about the party of the second part, James George Frazer, and not merely how he came to be at Trinity but, more importantly, how he came to be open to a life-changing experience such as his encounter with Smith would prove to be. Born in Glasgow in 1854 (that is, nearly eight years after Smith) the eldest son of Daniel Frazer, a well-known druggist (Frazer & Green, Buchanan Street), from his earliest days James George

[2] The text is TCC (Trinity College, Cambridge) Frazer 1:39. For the full text, see Robert Ackerman (ed.), *Selected Letters of Sir J. G. Frazer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 102–10. In the end White produced a slender pamphlet of reminiscences, incorporating only a few sentences from Frazer's letter: *Two Professors of Oriental Languages* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1899), 19–34.

showed outstanding academic ability. He matriculated in the University of Glasgow in November 1869, two months shy of his sixteenth birthday, and there amassed a brilliant record. Nonetheless, he knew when he graduated in 1874 that his academic preparation was incomplete. Having chosen classics as his subject, his path lay south, to an English university. He thought of competing for the Snell Exhibition, which had sent a stream of bright young Scotsmen, from Adam Smith to Andrew Lang, to Balliol College. His father, who had by this time overcome his disappointment at his son's lack of interest in joining the business, had different ideas. To Daniel Frazer, a stalwart of the Free Church, Balliol meant Oxford, and Oxford meant High Church, and perhaps even a last lingering hint of Newman and Rome from thirty years earlier: 'fearing to expose me to the contagion he sent me to Cambridge instead'.[3] A friend of Daniel Frazer's recommended Trinity College, and so the decision was made. Daniel Frazer would probably have died if he knew that he was sending his son to what was then probably the epicentre of rationalism and unbelief in Britain.

At Trinity, the most aristocratic of the Cambridge colleges, the studious young Frazer was certainly one of the ever-present if always small contingent of 'reading men'. His brilliant showing at Glasgow was repeated when he came second in the classical Tripos in 1878. This in turn led to a six-year college fellowship, which meant that he had the time to continue his already wide reading and to follow new interests when and as they arose, all the while looking for a scholarly project that might make his name in the academic world. During the term of his fellowship he applied for a number of teaching positions, indeed including one at the University of Aberdeen, but fortunately all his vocational forays came to nothing. One foray in the library did come to something, however: sometime during these six years, at the urging of his friend the psychologist James Ward, he read E. B. Tylor's pioneering *Primitive Culture* (1871), which applied a Darwinian perspective to the domain of human culture. Tylor offered an evolutionary survey of the entire spectrum of social institutions, including those especially sensitive ones – mythology and religion – that passionately preoccupied the educated middle classes of the post-Darwinian generation. *Primitive Culture* must have made a deep

[3] J. G. Frazer, 'Speech on Receiving the Freedom of the City of Glasgow', in *Creation and Evolution in Primitive Cosmogonies and Other Pieces* (London: Macmillan, 1935), 120. This essay, along with its sequel 'Memories of My Parents' (also in *Creation and Evolution),* together constitute a memoir of sorts and contain most of the information we have about Frazer's youth.

impression; despite Frazer's abiding friendship for Smith, a fitting epitaph for Tylor might have been 'genuit Frazerum'.

In 1884 we have two important events: the 30-year-old Frazer embarked on a significant scholarly enterprise by signing a contract with George Macmillan to prepare a two-volume translation of, and commentary on, the description of Greece composed by the second-century Greek traveller Pausanias. This was definitely not 'pure' or disinterested scholarship: on the contrary, the work was intended for the use of the growing number of adventurous tourists who were beginning to make the difficult journey to Athens to see the ruins and peer over the shoulders of the archaeologists into the excavations then taking place all around the city. It's worth noting that Pausanias, who was (depending in your point of view) either an amateur ethnographer or else just a busybody who loved to poke his nose into odd corners, had a special interest in curious rural customs that had long since been forgotten in Athens, which would later offer Frazer innumerable opportunities for commentary. Taken together, Tylor's book and Pausanias's curiosity, along with his friendship with Henry Jackson, vice-master of the college and a keen student of ethnography, suggest that Frazer may not have been quite an anthropological virgin when in January 1884 he met William Robertson Smith in the senior common room at Trinity.

Here, then, we have Frazer's account from 1897:

> When he [Smith] came to Cambridge he joined Trinity and had a very small set of rooms allotted to him in Whewell's Court. . .I used to see him at dinner in the college hall and in the street for some time before I made his acquaintance. But one evening, I think in January 1884, when I had gone, contrary to my custom, to combination room after dinner he came and sat beside me and entered into conversation.
>
> I think that one subject of our talk that evening was the Arabs in Spain and that, though I knew next to nothing about the subject, I attempted some sort of argument with him, but was immediately beaten down, in the kindest and gentlest way, by his learning, and yielded myself captive at once. I never afterwards, so far as I can remember, attempted to dispute the mastership which he thenceforth exercised over me by his extraordinary union of genius and learning. From that time we went walks together sometimes in the afternoons, and sometimes he asked me to his rooms. . .

> Afterwards he moved to larger and better rooms. Here he staid [sic] till he left Trinity for Christ's College, where he was elected to a fellowship [in 1885]. On selfish grounds I regretted his migration to Christ's, as it prevented me from seeing him so easily and so often as before.

Smith may have been glad to hear a Scottish voice (later in the letter Frazer remarks that Smith 'once introduced me as "one of the Scotch contingent" to a great friend of his, the late professor of Arabic, William Wright, himself a Scotchman'), or he may have heard that Frazer shared his own Free Church background; in any event they met and quickly became friends. Smith soon saw that his compatriot was clever and that Pausanias did not occupy all his waking hours. As editor of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* he was always on the lookout for likely contributors and immediately pressed Frazer into service.

In those days the volumes of the *Britannica* were published one or two at a time, as completed. By 1884 the first seventeen volumes, covering the letters A through O, had already appeared; thus it was that Frazer's contributions are all on subjects that begin with P and subsequent letters. Frazer continues:

> While he was still living in Whewell's Court [in 1884] he gratified me very much by asking me to contribute some of the smaller classical articles to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, of which he was then joint editor. My little articles pleased him and he afterwards entrusted me with a more important one, that on Pericles. I was flattered by the trust, but when I came to write I could not satisfy myself and made great efforts to get him to transfer the work to someone else. He did his best to relieve me, even telegraphing (if I remember aright) to a man at a distance to ask him to undertake it, and when all proved fruitless he actually came to my rooms and began writing with his own hand at my dictation or from my notes to oblige me to make a start with it. This may serve to give some faint notion of the endless trouble he had to endure as editor of the *Encyclopaedia*.

It is not excessive to describe this as an account of a courtship – in an intellectual setting to be sure, and between two men, but a courtship for all of that. I'm afraid that I feel compelled to add at this point that this does not mean that either man was what we would today call homosexual. It does mean that same-sex friendships, then as now, and however intellectual their setting or *raison d'être*, often have underlying erotic components that are not

explicitly expressed; furthermore, that likening this one to a courtship does not do violence to Frazer's narrative, especially because the suggestive language – 'yielding oneself captive', 'mastership' – is his own. The letter also makes clear that in terms of their relationship, from the start Smith was the dominant male while the insecure Frazer immediately assumed the passive role conventionally assigned to the woman.

The same long letter (written, it should be remembered, to an acquaintance) continues as he summons up, in an outpouring of emotion, some of the peak moments that he and Smith enjoyed. They went on a walking tour in Scotland in September of that happy first year, 1884:

> He loved the mountains, and one of my most vivid recollections of him is his sitting on a hillside looking over the mountains and chanting or rather crooning some of the Hebrew psalms in a sort of rapt ecstatic way. I did not understand them, but I suppose they were some of the verses in which the psalmist speaks of lifting his eyes to the hills. He liked the absolutely bare mountains, with nothing on them but the grass and the heather, better than wooded mountains, which I was then inclined to prefer. We made an expedition in a boat down the loch and spent a night in a shepherd's cottage. He remarked what a noble life a shepherd's is. I think he meant that the shepherd lives so much with nature, away from the squalor and vice of cities, and has to endure much hardship in caring for his flock. After returning from our long rambles on the hills we used to have tea (and an exceedingly comfortable tea) at the little inn and then we read light literature (I read French novels, I forget what he read), stretched at ease one of us on the sofa, the other on an easy chair. These were amongst the happiest days I ever spent, and I looked forward to spending similar days with him again. But they never came.

Frazer had never met anyone with whom he had such complete rapport nor would he ever do so later. 'But they never came' is the epitaph on a perfect Victorian honeymoon.

There is more. Elizabeth Barrett Browning asked, 'How much do I love thee?' Let's allow Frazer to count the ways. Smith was a brilliant man, but unlike other clever men at Trinity he never used his learning to gain attention or to oppress others with his erudition.[4]

[4] For another view, here is Henry Sidgwick, in his journal, recounting meeting Smith at dinner on 19 February 1885: 'Met Robertson Smith there: the little man flowed,

> As a companion he was perfect, always considerate and kind, always buoyant and cheerful, always in conversation pouring out a seemingly inexhaustible stream of the most interesting conversation. He talked in such a way as to bring out the best talk of others. He was the best listener as well as the best talker I ever knew. I mean that he paid close attention to what was said, and took it in with electric rapidity. I used to feel as if it were almost needless to complete a sentence in speaking with him. He seemed intuitively to anticipate all one meant to say on hearing the first few words. I used to think of him as a fine musical instrument, sensitive in every fibre and responding instantaneously to every touch. . .
>
> One thing that gave one a special confidence in speaking to him was a feeling that he knew one inside and outside better than one knew oneself, and that though he must have discerned all one's blemishes and weaknesses he still chose to be a friend. He was almost, if not quite, the only one of my friends with whom I have had this feeling of being known through and through by him. This gave one an assurance that his regard would be unalterable, because there was no depth in one's nature which he had not explored and knew. With almost all other friends I have felt as if they knew only little bits of my nature and were liable at any moment wholly to misunderstand my words and acts because they did not know the rest of me.

In *Wuthering Heights*, Catherine says that she does not *love* Heathcliff, she *is* Heathcliff. What we have here in Frazer's letter, which I see as an entry in a diary that would otherwise be meant for no other eyes, is the language of romantic passion, of the incorporation of the beloved into oneself, the whole thing shot through with the melancholy of the might-have-been. One can imagine his desperation in those early days, when his wish to please Smith came into conflict with his chronic anxiety and self-doubt over 'Pericles'. It is fortunate for both of them that in the end he managed to produce the article, after which we hear no more about any writer's block.

Later in the letter we have another lover's memory in the form of a charming vignette. One day after Smith had departed for Christ's, the two of them decided to watch a college boat race. Smith on the bank

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entertained, domineered, almost as usual'. TCC Add. MS c. 97:25 (30).

> in his eager enthusiastic way determined to run . . . beside the Christ's boat, his college boat. He started bravely but by the time we got opposite Ditton corner he was out of breath and stopped to rest. As there was some danger of his being knocked down and trampled on by the mob of undergraduates who were rushing along cheering their college boats in the usual vociferous way, I interposed my pretty robust form between his slight figure and the crowd, and I have a vivid recollection of his standing on the bank looking gratefully at me and panting while the roaring multitude swept past us.[5]

It was on such a spring tide of emotion that Frazer's introduction—perhaps 'conversion' is a better word—to anthropology took place. That he wanted to know about Smith's special subject, in order to be a better friend to him, was undoubtedly part of the attraction of the new field. But there were other ways in which an ambitious young classical scholar might have found it attractive as well. One was that anthropology was then nearly 'empty', at any rate in comparison with the well-ploughed field of classics, and was as yet unorganised and unprofessionalized. Seemingly, everything in the discipline remained to be done. It had yet to be recognized as a field of study in the university, and therefore there were as yet no academic positions in it in Britain, but at least the continued existence of the empire and the continuing needs of the Colonial Service meant that this was likely to be a discipline with a future.

These larger considerations notwithstanding, on the personal level the tempo of their relationship picked up quickly, for as soon as Frazer had overcome his hesitations with 'Pericles', Smith immediately assigned him his first nonclassical essays, 'Taboo' and 'Totemism'. These assignments had profound consequences: from the former sprang, five years later, *The Golden Bough*; from the latter, twenty-five years later, the four massive volumes of *Totemism and Exogamy* (1910), which in turn was the direct inspiration for Freud's *Totem und Tabu* (1913), the title of which obviously chimes on Frazer's.

At the time Frazer did not know enough to write on either subject with the authority appropriate to the *Encyclopaedia*. He could have been induced to take on these commissions only on the condition that Smith work with him closely. If we assume that the affection between the two men was mutual, then it is easy to see that Frazer's requirement, which guaranteed continued intimacy, suited both of them. Indeed, we have a letter from Smith to their mutual

[5] Frazer, robust form and all, was about five feet four inches tall, and Smith little more than five feet.

friend J. S. Black, in which he says that he is going to make extra space for the article on 'Totemism': 'There is no article in the volume for which I am more solicitous. I have taken much personal pains with it, guiding Frazer carefully in his treatment; and he has put in about seven months hard work on it to make it the standard article on the subject'. [6]

By 1885, then, Frazer had found his subject—the comparative anthropological study of the 'primitive' mind and 'primitive' religion, with special attention to mythology. Not only that, but he had also found his ideal colleague and friend, one from whom he could learn and one with whom he had total rapport. Their situation as Scotsmen among Sassenachs and the Free Church childhood they shared constituted a core of common experience, from which doubtless grew the allusive emotional shorthand available only to those for whom everything need not be explained. And although he could not share his friend's special knowledge of the Semitic world, one would think that their feelings about religion, and in particular the religion in which both had been raised, might have become subjects of conversation as they took their long walks. But, remarkably, this was not the case.

> He seldom alluded to the controversy he had had with a section of the Free Church in Scotland, and when he did so it was without the least trace of bitterness. He never once in my hearing uttered a word of complaint as to the treatment to which he had been subjected. On the contrary I received an impression, more from his expressive silence, I think, than from anything he said, that he was still deeply attached to the Free Church. I confess I never understood his inmost views on religion. On this subject he maintained a certain reserve which neither I nor (so far as I know) any of his intimates cared to break through. I never even approached, far less discussed, the subject with him.[7]

Let us accept, as we must, that Smith remained a Christian lifelong, albeit of a sophisticated kind that would have been, and was, incomprehensible

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[6] J. S. Black and George Chrystal, *The Life of William Robertson Smith* (London: A. & C. Black), 1912), 494–95. The article, considerably enlarged, became Frazer's first book, *Totemism* (Edinburgh: A. & C. Black, 1887).

[7] Stanley A. Cook, a friend and disciple, did not share Frazer's inhibition about Smith's religious views. He states flatly that Smith was always a Christian, and that 'he had no sympathy with . . . any thorough-going humanism or rationalism'. *Centenary of the Birth on 8th November 1846 of the Reverend Professor W. Robertson Smith* (Aberdeen: The University Press, 1951), p. 16.

to most in his church. And Frazer—where did he stand? He tells us in his memoir about growing up in what sounds like the model of a pious Free Church home, with his father leading daily prayers for the entire household. The Frazer family too had its version of the strenuous Scottish Sunday, with its exclusive diet of divine service and edifying books. In view of what he became—I rate him along with H. G. Wells as the foremost propagandist for rationalism/secularism in Britain in the first half of the twentieth century—it may come as a surprise that Frazer tells us that he enjoyed it: 'I never found this observance of the Sabbath irksome or wearisome. On the contrary I look back to those peaceful Sabbath days with something like fond regret, and the sound of Sabbath bells, even in a foreign land, still touches a deep chord in my heart'. He decisively cut the connection to the religion of his childhood sometime during his adolescence—I suspect while he was at the University of Glasgow—but without the rebellion that often accompanies such a momentous step. His final remark about his parents' religion is worth noting: 'I should add that although my father and my mother were deeply and sincerely pious they never made a parade of their religion; they neither talked of it themselves nor encouraged us children to do so; the subject was too sacred for common conversation'.[8] The parallel, both verbal and otherwise, between the way he describes his father's attitude toward religion and Smith's is striking, and one to which I shall return.

Although Smith is remembered principally for his biblical criticism, among his other controversial ideas was that ancient and 'primitive' religions were essentially systems of practice rather than belief, of ritual rather than myth. In Smith's view, in such religions it did not much matter what the individual members of the worshipping community believed about the gods, but it mattered supremely that as a group they carried out the right rituals in the correct way. Indeed, he went so far as to assert that 'So far as myths consist of explanations of ritual, their value is altogether secondary, and it may be affirmed with confidence that in almost every case the myth was derived from the ritual, and not the ritual from the myth; for the ritual was fixed and the myth was variable, the ritual was obligatory and faith in the myth was at the discretion of the worshipper'.[9]

Whereas the dominant point of view among scholars of religion in Britain in the 1880s was intellectual, individualist, and psychological, Smith was

[8] *Creation and Evolution*, p. 133.

[9] William Robertson Smith, *The Religion of the Semites*, rev. ed. (1894; rpt. New York: Schocken Books, 1972), 17–18.

irrationalist, collectivist, and sociological. It is therefore not a surprise that in his analysis of Semitic religion he focused not on creed but on practice, and specifically on sacrifice. In the most notable form of such sacrifice, according to Smith the tribe consumed the sacrificial animal victim that was normally forbidden to them because it was their divine totem-brother. In Frazer's words, drawn from the distinctly cool obituary of Smith that he composed immediately after his passing, 'Smith was the first to perceive the true nature of what he has called mystical or sacramental sacrifices', the peculiarity of these being that in them the victim slain is 'an animal or a man whom the worshippers regarded as divine, and of whose flesh and blood they sometimes partook, as a solemn form of communion with the deity'.[10] Smith's idea of a dying god was directly and immediately influential: as Frazer acknowledges in the preface to the first edition of *The Golden Bough* (1890), 'the central idea of my essay – the conception of the slain god – is derived directly, I believe, from my friend [Robertson Smith]'.

The other explicit influence on Frazer in the first edition of *The Golden Bough* was the eminent German scholar Wilhelm Mannhardt (1831–80).[11] Over the course of years of fieldwork Mannhardt compiled thousands of 'popular superstitions and customs of the [European] peasantry' because he understood that these would furnish 'the fullest and most trustworthy evidence we possess as to the primitive religion of the Aryans'.[12] Not only was Frazer indebted to Mannhardt for this immense body of fieldwork data, but he also took from him the key conception of the 'vegetation spirit' or 'corn demon', i.e., the divinity believed to be indwelling in growing things whom the rite is supposed to placate or gratify. This emphasis on action rather than belief among the primitives and ancients in the work of both Mannhardt and Smith, which became known as 'ritualism' at the turn of the century in the work of Jane Ellen Harrison, Gilbert Murray, and Francis Cornford, had an effect on Frazer as well. Although all three editions of *The Golden Bough* are a theoretical jumble regarding the origin and meaning of mythology, Frazer was probably most sympathetic to ritualism in the early years of his career.

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[10] Frazer's obituary essay, 'William Robertson Smith', appeared first in the *Fortnightly Review*, 55 (May 1894), 800–07; rpt. in his collection *The Gorgon's Head* (London: Macmillan, 1927), 278–90.

[11] Thus Frazer in the preface: 'I have made great use of the works of the late W. Mannhardt, without which, indeed, my book could scarcely have been written'. 'Preface to the First Edition', *The Golden Bough,* 3rd ed., I, xii.

[12] Ibid..

Now we fast-forward past Smith's death in 1894 to 1900, by which time Frazer has undergone a change of heart regarding the relationship of myth and ritual. In the preface to the *second* edition of the *Golden Bough* (1900), he notes that the French sociologists Hubert and Mauss have mistakenly concluded that Frazer agreed with Smith about the primacy of ritual over myth, and he goes out of his way to disavow Smith's theory of the totem sacrament: Hubert and Mauss, he says,

> have represented my theory of the slain god as intended to supplement and complete Robertson Smith's theory of the derivation of animal sacrifice in general from a totem sacrament. On this I have to say that the two theories are quite independent of one another. I never assented to my friend's theory, and, so far as I can remember, he never gave me a hint that he assented to mine.[13]

My point is not that his ideas have changed, but the importance that Frazer places upon emphasizing the distance between him and Smith. Not only have their ideas diverged, but (according to Frazer in 1900) they were never the same even when Smith was alive. Moreover, he doesn't understand why Hubert and Mauss, who ought to know better, make this mistake. If this were the whole story, however, I wouldn't have brought this to your attention.

When we move up a decade, to 1911, not only do we have Reinach's remark with which I began, but also an astonishing exchange in which the Frazer-Smith relationship takes a striking posthumous turn.[14] By this time *The Golden Bough* is in its twelve-volume third edition (all three of which are dedicated to Smith), and in Frazer's mind Smith has become something of an icon, before which a quick genuflection regularly takes place whenever he passes by. Literally: in Frazer's correspondence Smith's name is nearly always preceded by the epithet 'ever-lamented'.

On 10 October 1910 Frazer's younger contemporary, R. R. Marett (1866–1943) was installed as reader in social anthropology in Oxford. In his inaugural lecture Marett wrote 'That ritual, or in other words a routine of external forms, is historically prior to dogma was proclaimed years ago by Robertson Smith and others'.[15] Here it is again—the same misreading of which Hubert

[13] Ibid., p. xxii.

[14] The Frazer-Marett letters are TCC Add. MS c. 56b, 198–200. I published them in 'Frazer on Myth and Ritual', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 36 (1975), 115–34.

[15] The lecture, 'The Birth of Humility', was given on 27 October 1910 and published as a

and Mauss were guilty ten years earlier, and again Frazer doesn't understand why this error remains current. Upon reading the lecture Frazer wrote, with some asperity, on 11 May 1911 to Marett: 'Allow me to correct what I believe to be a mistake on your part. So far as I know Robertson Smith's views from intimate personal acquaintance as well as from a study of his writings, he never proclaimed that 'ritual is historically prior to dogma', as you say he did. On the contrary I believe that he would have rejected such a view (as I do) as a manifest absurdity'. He then goes on at considerable length to explain what he believed Smith's position to be, which unsurprisingly turns out to be the same as Frazer's current views ('Savage ritual, so far as I have studied it, seems to me to bear the imprint of reflexion and purpose stamped on it just as plainly as any actions of civilised men'.) Not only is Marett wrong but, he writes with some testiness, others have committed the same mistake. ('You are not the first who has fallen into this error. A German. . . has ascribed precisely the same views that you do not only to Robertson Smith but to me! to me, who repudiate them as an absurdity'.)

Marett replies two days later, denying that he has erred and citing the passages from *The Religion of the Semites* that I have already quoted in which Smith sets forth the ritualist hypothesis. Regarding the sentence in which Frazer says that savage ritual is imbued with just as much 'reflexion' as that of any civilised people, Marett will have none of it.

> If you print your view in that form, using the word reflexion thus unqualified, I believe that every psychologist in Europe, including [Frazer's friend James] Ward, will be down upon you. No one would be such a fool as to say that there was *no* reflexion at work in savage religion; these things that we distinguish as higher and lower, conceptual and perceptual, processes shade off into each other, so that the difference is always one of *degree* rather than of kind. But to say that the stamp of reflexion is 'just as' plain seems on the face of it to say that both types of religion – the savage and the civilised – are *equally* reflexive, or each in its way as reflexive as the other. If, however, you mean that plainly there is a *very little* reflexion at work in savage religion, and, equally plainly, there is a *great deal* of it at work in civilised religion, then no one will deny that; but they will claim the right, when drawing a

pamphlet by the Clarendon Press immediately afterward, but is more easily consulted as part of Marett's *The Threshold of Religion*, 2nd edn (London: Clarendon, 1914), 169–202, at 181.

> broad contrast, to call the former 'unreflective' as compared with the latter. And Robertson Smith went further; he called it 'unconscious'.

Faced with citations of Smithian chapter and verse, Frazer, definitely surprised, backs off.

> The passages of Robertson Smith to which you call my attention certainly support your interpretation of his view more fully than I had supposed. But I still incline to think that he was emphasising a novel view (the importance of the study of ritual as compared with myth or dogma) and that in doing so he omitted to state (what he probably assumed) that every ritual is preceded in the minds of the men who institute it by a definite train of reasoning, even though that train of reasoning may not be definitely formulated in words and promulgated as a dogma.

He backs off but he will not give up. In 'He omitted to state what he probably assumed' we see that Frazer is as willing to read Smith's mind as he is that of the savages. I should like to suggest that at least part of the reason for such unwillingness to yield lies in what Smith had come to mean to him over the twenty years since his death. Frazer was by lifelong inclination and temperament a hardcore anticlerical rationalist who had in his adolescence shaken off Christianity, which it is not too much to say was most directly represented by his dominant and pious father. Then he meets and is swept off his feet by Robertson Smith, who embodies a new kind of religion with depths and complexities that he had never imagined, and one that he could never fathom. Obviously the example of Robertson Smith did not cause him to embrace Christianity once again—recall that religion, for both his father and for Smith, was too sacred for ordinary conversation—but there can be no doubt that he wrote the first edition of *The Golden Bough* while still under the personal spell of Smith. I should like to suggest that his passionate affection for Smith prevented him from disagreeing with him openly because of the possibility of a disastrous rupture were the disagreement to go too far. But once Smith was gone, Frazer's resentment at what I see as ten years of enforced reticence made itself felt. I hope that I have not done violence to the evidence when I note that he recapitulates the move away from Daniel Frazer with a second move away from his—what shall I call him? Obviously Smith wasn't old enough to be of Daniel Frazer's generation, but he was undeniably his intellectual father,

who opened up a wholly new mental landscape. Unfortunately, however, this new landscape, as created by Frazer in the seventeen years since Smith's death, had no space for the real Smith. It would be silly to present the timid Frazer as an Oedipal parricide seething with rage on the Cam, but the need to reject the father is, and has been, a constant among intellectuals. I regret now that I did not see this pattern earlier or I would have argued it at length in my biography, twenty years ago, but I hope that it is still useful to have discovered what 'genuit Frazerum' might mean.[16]

[16] The rejection of Smith is not the only time Frazer disavowed an intellectual parent. During his undergraduate days, as his library shows, he was a passionate admirer of the works of Herbert Spencer, and when he made his public 'debut' at the Anthropological Institute in 1885 he went out of his way to mention that Spencer's presence in the audience was a source of special pleasure. After the 1880s, however, Spencer drops out of his intellectual life completely, and when in 1922 Frazer came to summarize the history of anthropology ['The Scope and Method of Mental Anthropology', in *Garnered Sheaves* (London: Macmillan, 1927), 234–51], Spencer has been airbrushed out of the picture. See Robert Ackerman, *J. G. Frazer: His Life and Work* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 40–4.