

Forgotten Anthropological Ancestor

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The book is one of an excellent series, *Anthropology's Ancestors*, introducing figures whose works formed the foundations of anthropological knowledge. In this case, the work is dedicated to a person who, in many of the key textbooks on the history of our discipline, is treated marginally or omitted altogether, although, as the author shows, his contribution to the development of the study of ritual, myth, and religion was immense.

In the beginning, we are given a detailed biography of William Robertson Smith that shows the foundation of his intellectual formation shaped by his family and subsequent studies. But we get not only a detailed scientific biography of Smith himself but an excellent lecture on the history of ethnology and anthropology in the second half of the 19th century.

Interestingly, during the triumphs of cabinet anthropology, of which Smith's friend James Frazer was perhaps the best-known representative, Smith with his surveys of the Middle East appears almost like a field researcher. His first-hand knowledge of the studied area, with his excellent command of the Arab and Hebrew languages, sets him apart from anthropologists of the second half of the nineteenth century. Thus, alongside a presentation of Smith's scholarly achievements in the study of kinship, myth, and ritual, we have an insight into his scholarly travels through which he had the opportunity to build and revise his views of the Arab world. The gem of the book is the story of Smith's seminal research trip to the Hijaz, which is complemented by Smith's excellent defence against Edward Said's, presentist, absurd attack. The book shows that the research issues Smith addressed were discussed by other great evolutionists. Thus, he referred to questions of kinship, the origins of religion, the role of myths, rituals, totemism or sacrifice, in some cases following scholars already endowed with authority, in Smith's case, such a researcher was certainly J. F. McLennan

and his theory of totemism, at other times presenting a position different from the dominant one of the time, e.g., on the primacy of ritual and myth. Smith believed that ritual was primary to myth, the opposite of, for example, Andrew Lang, and, as we learn from the monograph, by the implications of this claim for the study of totemism, it was at best ignored by scholars addressing the issue later.

The author shows why, as with other evolutionists, at the heart of Smith's comparative method is the theory of "survivals", but at the same time, he points out why the "survivals" theory had to be discarded. Here the author aims at Margit Warburg's argument (p. 57) that only the right assumption guarantees the correctness of the method. Still, the same argument was expressed much earlier and more strongly in the introductory chapter of C. Levi-Strauss's "Structural Anthropology".

Although the contextual presentation of Smith's scientific output is carried out almost exemplarily, the book also has, in my opinion, one weaker point. There is a section whose presence somewhat disrupts the narrative structure. I am referring to Chapter 5, which deals with the concept of myth itself, considered here in isolation from the theories developed by Smith. This part of the work could constitute a separate short article without which Smith's monograph could have done without compromising the essential lecture. The next chapter deals with anthropological theories of myth, and here we find few references to Smith's work, although the placement of this chapter seems much more justified than the previous one. However, it would have been worth highlighting whether or not certain ideas were taken directly from Smith by subsequent scholars – this was missing.

The following chapters show the real impact of Robertson Smith's ideas on myth scholars or biblical scholars (with particular reference to the less-known Scandinavian tradition of biblical studies). Thus, the problem from the previous two chapters disappears. What's more, the reader can learn that the idea of religion as a social institution came precisely from Smith and, as we know, predated Durkheim's findings on the subject.

The work concludes with an impressive display of the genealogy of generations of anthropologists whose work is founded on the achievements of earlier generations. It is an excellent closure to the scientific biography of one of the founders of anthropological discourse, somewhat forgotten now but still worth rediscovering.

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