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### A Stage Our Ancestors Went Through: A. R. Brown and the Problem of Totemism in Western Australia, C. 1910

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## FOOTNOTES FOR THE HISTORY OF ANTHROPOLOGY

### A Stage our Ancestors Went Through: A. R. Brown and the Problem of Totemism in Western Australia, c. 1910.

Shortly after his arrival in Perth for his first fieldwork in Australia, A.R. Brown (not yet hyphenated) gave an interview to The West Australian on the purpose of his expedition, which was published on September 10, 1910. What is particularly striking is the extent to which Brown's project was directed to the most widely discussed evolutionary issue of his day (the origin of totemism), on which James Frazer had just published a four volume compendium of theoretical speculation and ethnographic data (cf. Stocking 1985a & b, 1995). Because of space limitations, the text reprinted here omits some non-essential material--notably, questions asked by the interviewer. As in the original, Brown's own words are placed within quotation marks.

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#### STUDY OF NATIVE RACES

Research in Western Australia

The Cambridge Expedition

Interview with the Leader

Anthropology has within the last decade been enjoying an unwonted prominence in the older of the world's centres of learning. It has asserted and made good its claim to rank among the most important of the sciences, and an alluring field of research is being exploited less fitfully and more systematically. Schemes of comprehensive and organised investigation have been developed or are maturing at the centres or "power houses," as they have been described, of intellectual activity in the Western Hemisphere [sic]. These schemes as a rule are fulfilled far from the place of their birth. The solution to the problems of anthropology does not lie along the road of University study or experiment. The anthropologist does not, like other scientists, lock himself in his laboratory, there to wheedle from nature her closely-guarded secrets. Anthropology calls for devoted and enthusiastic students, ready in the cause of science to face hardships and dangers far from the world's highways. "The ends of the earth are their portion," for the remote fields where original research only can be followed must of necessity entail a more or less prolonged exile. Just as the importance of anthropology is receiving increasing recognition in the scientific world, so Australia looms largely on the horizon of the anthropologists. The Cambridge University has taken a foremost position in recent anthropological research, and an expedition from that University is at present in Perth, and will leave in a week or two for the interior to add to our knowledge of the aborigines. . . .

The expedition will consist of Mr. Alfred Brown (leader) and Mr. Grant Watson. Mr. Brown is a Fellow (in Ethnology) of Trinity College, Cambridge, and Lecturer in Ethnology in the University of London. He also holds for the second time the Anthony Wilkin Studentship in Ethnology, of the value of £200. Mr. Grant Watson will devote himself chiefly to zoology, but will also assist Mr. Brown in his ethnological researches. The expedition is under the direction of a committee consisting of Professor Ridgeway, M.A., D.Sc., F.B.A., president of

the Royal Anthropological Institute, Professor of Archaeology at Cambridge; Dr. J.G. Frazer, F.B.A., Professor of Social Anthropology in the Liverpool University; Dr. A.C. Haddon, F.R.S., Fellow of Christ's College, Cambridge, and Lecturer in Ethnology; and Dr. W.H. Rivers, F.R.S. Besides what is provided by the Anthony Wilkin Studentship, the funds have been given by the Royal Society and by Sir John Murray, F.R.S. . . . Interviewed by a "West Australian" representative yesterday, Mr. Brown gave some interesting information regarding the origin and plan of the expedition.

"The expedition . . . has to a certain extent a double object. I am, of course, interested primarily in the aborigines, but I am taking Mr. Watson with me, and he as a zoologist will . . . study the interesting fauna of the country. . . . It was, of course, a matter of impossibility to determine our route in England. Before arranging our plans we will benefit from the local knowledge we can gain on the spot. We have 12 months ahead of us and possibly more, and we will be busily employed for the whole of that time." . . . "The Canning route [from Wiluna to Kimberley] appeals to me very much, but it has several disadvantages. One is that it would take a good deal more than 12 months to get across and do the work we have set ourselves, and I am not quite sure that equally valuable investigations could not be made in less time in other portions of the State."

. . . "I have already had many inquiries as to what has brought us out here to conduct investigations with the Australian aborigines, and before we leave for the interior I will deliver a lecture in Perth and explain the plans of the expedition. Broadly speaking, our desire is to add to the knowledge of the peculiar customs, religions and morals I may call them, of the aborigines. A number of problems have been suggested to the anthropologist by Messrs. Spencer and Gillen's work in Central Australia. These have been the subject of a good deal of controversy not only in England but in France and Germany. These disputed points concern totemism and other institutions, and it is more or less with the object of attempting to settle them that I am here. What they exactly are I hope to explain in the lecture that I will deliver, as well as the reason why it has been thought worth while to study the aborigines of Western Australia."

. . . "The value of anthropological research is growing every day, but meanwhile the subject matter of inquiry is so to speak disappearing. This applies to Western Australia as elsewhere. Since interest became aroused in this work the Australian aborigines have attracted more attention in the scientific world than the aborigines of any other country--much more attention. If you pick up any book on the subject you will find that most of the references are to these aborigines. They represent a very peculiar phase of society or social organisation. In a word they may be said to personify in certain features a stage in the past history of man everywhere. This is a stage which probably every race has passed through, including our ancestors of thousands of years ago. Western Australia has been chosen because the aborigines there are rapidly dying out, while the Australian aborigine generally presents a more interesting field of inquiry than any other race of aborigines. They are a national asset, not in the commercial sense of course, but they draw the attention of the scientific world to Australia."

. . . "They [the specific points of controversy in Europe] relate principally to totemism, the peculiar form of social organisation and of religion, which exists in Australia in one of its forms, and is also found in many other parts of the world, including North America, Africa, India, Melanesia, and New Guinea. It is, perhaps, the most primitive form of civilisation which is known, and there have lately been many theories put forward as to the origin of these

conditions. It is to test some of these theories that our expedition has been organised. Under totemism, a tribe is divided into a number of groups, each group taking its name from some animal or plant or other natural object which is its totem. There are certain customs which are always found. One is that the member of one group must not marry a member of his own group. This is what is called in technical language exogamy. Another characteristic is that the animal or plant from which a group takes its name is sacred to it. A certain group may, for instance, be called the Kangaroo group, and they must not kill or eat a kangaroo. The whole life of these native peoples, their religious life, and their moral life is bound up with the system of totemism. There have been all sorts of theories put forward in regard to totemism. Dr. Frazer and Dr. Andrew Lang have contributed to the recent controversy on the subject, and a point of difference between these two writers has been in relation to a particular tribe in the interior of Australia, the Aruntas. Dr. Frazer said they were the most primitive tribe in Australia, but Dr. Lang and others have disputed this. The discussion has turned on certain beliefs of the Aruntas, including their ignorance of what are to us primary physiological facts. The word totem comes from the language of the Ojibway tribe in North America. It is the name they give to the animal or plant which is sacred to different groups of the tribe. It has been applied in the same way in Australia as elsewhere. The importance of totemism lies in the fact that it is probably a stage of civilisation through which all mankind has passed in its progress upwards from the lowest savagery to civilisation. It has not been borrowed by one people from another but has sprung from the natural development of the race in Australia, Africa, India, and North America. It is that which constitutes its interest to sociologists. The problem on which sociologists who consider this branch of science are at present concentrating is the origin of these peculiar forms of society. Dr. Frazer has just published a work in four volumes on 'Totemism and Exogamy.' In this he has relied for his knowledge of the Australian aborigines on the work of Spencer and Gillen and Howitt. All the Australian aborigines belong in the totemic stage of society. There is a prevalent idea that a knowledge of the aborigines in one part of Australia is all that is required. But customs and beliefs vary every hundred miles. A study of all these variations is therefore essential to the understanding of their form of civilisation. It is no use confining the work of inquiry to one group alone. This is a mistake that has been made in England. They have taken the Aruntas, for instance, and argued about the beliefs and customs of this people without a full knowledge of other tribes. The aim of anthropology in this field is to obtain as much knowledge as possible of as many tribes as possible. You get different forms of the same institutions scattered all over Australia. The rule of exogamy, whereby a man must marry out of his own group, is in Australia very complicated. In some places the tribe is divided into two groups, which intermarry. This is the system particularly throughout much of the south of Australia. In the greater part of New South Wales and Queensland they are divided into four groups--a rather peculiar arrangement of alternating groups, whereby the children belong to different groups from either the father or the mother. The system of four groups is also found over the greater part of Western Australia. In the Northern Territory and in the north-west of Queensland and the north-east of Western Australia you get a system of eight exogamous classes. This represents a progressive development--the system developing in complex fashion from 2 to 4 and from 4 to 8. The reason of these changing systems is very obscure and has occasioned a good deal of discussion in England. It points to a very complicated marriage system, and great interest centres on the origin of the system. It is to

endeavour to throw light on some of these problems that our expedition is now visiting Western Australia."

. . . "A great amount of excellent work has of course already been done throughout Australia--by Howitt in New South Wales and Victoria, by Spencer and Gillen in Central Australia, by Strehlow, a German scientist who supplemented the work of Spencer and Gillen; by Roth in Queensland. Western Australia, therefore, presents the best field for original research, as the only part of the continent which has not so far been studied. Mrs. Bates has of course been studying it, and of her work I can speak in terms of the highest praise, considering the disadvantages under which she laboured, with no one to consult or to assist her with criticisms and suggestions. When I first arranged this expedition I did not know that Mrs. Bates had done the work she has. Mrs. Bates has very kindly placed her manuscripts at my disposal, and thereby saved me a great deal of trouble. I will go over some of the ground covered by Mrs. Bates in order to obtain fuller information, but some of her work was done among aborigines who are now extinct, and the value of her reseraches will therefore be apparent. In this class of investigations every six months makes a difference. Sources of information vanish from the face of the earth never to reappear again. People do not as a rule realise that there is enough work here to occupy three or four men for the same number of years gathering information about the natives, information which will be valuable to posterity, if not to the present generation."

. . . "It is only within the last few years that people have been giving their earnest attention to the study of mankind. That is, in the way of research work. During the last 15 years science has been steadily growing in importance in European countries. Our expedition was originally to be a Cambridge and Oxford Expedition, but obstacles arose which prevented Oxford from joining in, and so Cambridge is doing the work itself. The Cambridge University during the last few years has taken a lead in anthropology. It began with Dr. Haddon's expedition of Cambridge scientists to the Torres Straits, chiefly to study the natives there. Dr. Rivers, another Cambridge scientist, who has devoted himself to anthropology, was a member of the Torres Straits expedition, and afterward did similar work among the Todas in Southern India. Anthony Wilkin, who accompanied Dr. Haddon on the Torres Straits trip, afterwards died of Malaria during an expedition to the Soudan, and the Anthony Wilkin studentship was founded in his memory. This studentship is given every five years for research in ethnology. I was the first who received it and I then went to the Andaman Islands. When it was given again, I was re-elected in order to carry on work in Australia. Dr. Rivers, by the way, only recently returned to Cambridge from the Solomon Islands."

. . . "In my opinion anthropological research has not yet received the recognition it deserves from the Government or University authorities. For the last two years we have been trying in England to get the Government to establish an ethnographical bureau. There is a bureau of this kind in the United States, where it has done excellent work. There is there a Government department for the scientific study of the native races over the whole of North America. It publishes reports every year, and collects museum specimens. The establishment of a similar institution had been suggested for the study of the native races of the British Empire. Representations in favour of the creation of such a bureau have been made by, among others, merchants and colonial Governors, who have urged that a knowledge of the native races is an important factor in commerce and government. Germany gives the facilities that we are asking

should be afforded in England for the study of the native races. It has been realised by Germany that a knowledge of the customs of native races is necessary in dealing with them in the way either of government or of trade. This does not, of course, apply to Australia as it does to Africa or India. But the scientist does not concern himself with practical results. He simply inquires along the lines of the theories which suggest themselves to him. Practical results may, of course, follow. Hertz, in his experiments, for instance, was not trying to invent wireless telegraphy. Still it was his studies in electricity which led the way to the discovery of wireless telegraphy."

Mr. Brown expects to begin practical research work in about three weeks. The results would be published in England, but Mr. Brown hopes to be able to give to Western Australia some information regarding the outcome of the expedition.

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[cf. Stocking, "Dr. Durkheim and Mr. Brown: Comparative Sociology at Cambridge in 1910" and "Radcliffe-Brown and British Social Anthropology," in History of Anthropology 2 (1984):106-91; After Tylor: British Social Anthropology, 1888-1951 (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1995)]

## **CLIO'S FANCY: DOCUMENTS TO PIQUE THE HISTORICAL IMAGINATION**

### **L. H. Morgan, *Mechanistic Materialism and the Contradictions of the Capitalist System: The Soviet Response to Leslie White*, c. 1932.**

Igor Kopytoff (University of Pennsylvania)

The following is a translation of the editorial introduction (pp. 52-54) to an article by Leslie White, which appeared in 1932 in the premier Soviet journal of anthropology, Sovetskaia Etnografiia, entitled "Evolutsiia Kul'tury i Amerikanskaia Shkola Istoricheskoi Etnologii" (The Evolution of Culture and the American School of Historical Ethnology), pp. 54-86. Though it is one of the earliest formal statements by White of his theoretical position, it has, to my knowledge, been left out of discussions of White's theories. It is omitted in the obituary of White by Robert L. Carneiro in the International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences (vol 18, 1979), though mentioned by Beth Dillingham in her bibliographic contribution to White's obituary in the American Anthropologist (1976, vol. 78:620-629). And White himself does not appear to have referred to it in his own work.

The article--which grew out of a paper White gave at the 1931 meetings of the A.A.A.--is prototypical White: a critique of Boasian anthropology and of the attacks on cultural evolutionism by such figures as Boas, Lowie, and Goldenweiser; a eulogy of Morgan; a sketch of the evolutionary development of culture as a function of the growth of technology; a discussion of the need for a social system to be congruent with its technology; and, finally, a brief foray into the nature of the contemporary class contradictions and the inevitability of their resolution through the victory of the working class. It should certainly be looked at by connoisseurs of White.