

**J. G. Frazer: His Life and Work.** By Robert Ackerman. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987. Pp. x + 348, 11 illustrations, 2 appendices, bibliographical notes, abbreviations, notes, index. \$39.95)

DAN BEN-AMOS

*University of Pennsylvania*

“Darwin, Marx, Frazer and Freud are among the most important thinkers of the past century, and are significant shapers of the modern mind and of the present century” (Stanly Edgar Hyman, *The Tangled Bank: Darwin, Marx, Frazer and Freud and Imaginative Writers* [1966], p. x). Of these four, Frazer is probably the only one who has written more books than has books written about him. Surely, references and allusions to his works abound. In 1922 T. S. Eliot cited in his “Notes on ‘The Waste Land’ ” Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* as a work “which has influenced our generation profoundly” (*The Complete Poems and Plays: 1909–1950* [1952], p. 50). In addition to T. S. Eliot, John Vickery counts William Butler Yeats, D. H. Lawrence, and James Joyce among the literary masters that came under the influence of *The Golden Bough* (*The Literary Impact of The Golden Bough*, 1973). But the glitter of *The Golden Bough* in literature was tarnished in anthropology, Frazer’s own discipline. Bronislaw Malinowski, Frazer’s protégé, turned implicitly against Frazer’s evolutionary approach by applying to myth his own functional analysis in, no less, the second Frazer lecture at the University of Liverpool in 1925 (*Magic Science and Religion* [1948], pp. 93–148). His students continued to demote Frazer from the prominent position as a leading anthropologist he held in the previous century. Sir Edward Evans-Pritchard denies *The Golden Bough* any valid theoretical significance (*A History of Anthropological Thought* [1981], pp. 132–152), and the title of Edmund Leach’s essay “Golden Bough or Gilded Twig,” (*Daedalus* 90[1961]:371–399) says it all.

In spite of all this both positive and negative prominence, until now only Frazer’s secretary, R. Angus Downie, wrote a book about him (*Frazer and the Golden Bough* [1970]). Hence Robert Ackerman’s biography of Frazer fills a long existing gap in the history of folklore and anthropology. There could not have been a better-equipped person to undertake this monumental task. In his initial research Ackerman explored “The Cambridge Group and the Origins of Myth Criticism” (Columbia University, unpublished dissertation, 1969). In Cambridge, in Frazer’s library, he came upon Frazer’s immense correspondence, and the single chapter that was devoted to him in the dissertation grew into a full-fledged biography.

Frazer, who enclosed himself in his library, from which he emerged only infrequently, epitomized scholarship, and on this side of the Middle Ages, carried the idea of erudition to its ultimate absurdity. The sheer amount of time required to produce the multivolume editions of *The Golden Bough*, the multivolume works of Pausanias’s *Description of Greece*, and *Folk-Lore in the Old Testament*, in addition to other books left little time for anything else. How then is it possible to write a biography of a life that appears to be completely encapsulated in its scholarly outpour?

Ackerman succeeds in this onerous task by sifting through Frazer’s extensive correspondence, correlating the private communication with information he culls from Frazer’s published opus, and by reading between the lines of prefaces, notes, and acknowledgments. The portrait that emerges is of a person with enormous energy, stamina, and ambition who has been frustrated by the apparent lack of recognition at his home university, and in his later years, by the criticism to which subsequent generations have subjected his work. Ackerman’s Frazer is not a monkish survival from the Middle Ages that renounces the world for the sake of scholarship, but a person who has his own human and intellectual frailties and who succumbs to the temptation of honor and the glimmer of financial security.

His intellectual evolution had been influenced by the dominant theories of the late 19th century, and his own personal development had been affected by personal relations, friendships, and professional contacts. Ackerman traces nuances and inconsistencies in Frazer's thought and follows some of the fluctuations in his thesis concerning the evolution from myth to magic and science. Often these changes are subtle and are buried under voluminous verbiage, requiring comparisons of the three editions of *The Golden Bough* and matching them up with personal correspondence.

For example, Frazer's friendship with Robertson Smith, the brilliant fellow Scotchman whom he met at Trinity College, had a major impact on Frazer's career. Smith, who was an editor of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* at that time, commissioned Frazer to write the entries on "Taboo" and "Totemism." In what was to become a pattern, these entries grew into *The Golden Bough* and *Totemism and Exogamy*, respectively. In the first edition of *The Golden Bough* Frazer resonated Smith's idea that myth evolved as articulation of the meaning of ritual, and became autonomous when the rituals have been forgotten or misunderstood. Instead of Müller's myth as a by-product of "disease of language," Smith's myth became self-sufficient because of a "diseased ritual." Ackerman follows Frazer's attempts in later years to distance himself from the position he once held, as they become apparent in his letters to Robert Ranulph Marett. He resented the scholarly association between his and Smith's ideas (pp. 226–230). Ackerman attempts to spell out Frazer's own conception of myth, but instead of a consistent theory finds that three theories (euhemerism, cognitionism, and ritualism) coexist throughout Frazer's writing without much regard for their inconsistencies. Ackerman attributes this not so much to logical carelessness, but, in a tribute to Hyman rather than Bakhtin, to a continuous dialogical reasoning (p. 233).

In his lifetime, and certainly posthumously, Frazer enjoyed admiration and suffered denigration. Andrew Lang's critique and ridicule was particularly devastating (pp. 170–175). In modern times the debate about Frazer's import and his effect on modern thought is continuing (see Marc Manganaro, "'The Tangled Bank' revisited: Anthropological Authority in Frazer's *The Golden Bough*," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 3[1989]:107–126). Ackerman's biography places the man next to his books. In his commentary on and interpretations of actions taken and positions held by Frazer, Ackerman is compassionate, preferring understanding to criticism. His biography is meticulously researched and reasoned and is an exemplary addition to the list of books dealing with the history of folklore and folklorists.

**Literacy and Orality.** By Ruth Finnegan. (Basil Blackwell: Oxford, 1988. Pp. ix + 201, preface, references, index. \$49.95)

BRIAN V. STREET  
*University of Sussex*

This collection of essays, by one of the leading authorities in the field, was written between 1969 and 1984, with the addition of a new introduction by the author and some updating of references in the older articles. Although there is inevitably some repetition, these additions give the collection coherence, providing the reader with guidance through the different pieces, while the index further assists those who wish to read them thematically rather than in chronological order. It is also convenient to have the articles published in one place as they are currently scattered and not available to the general reader.

What, however, lifts the volume above simply a collection of occasional pieces is that Finnegan has chosen to focus the introduction on the relatively new and pertinent question of how we are to make sense of the so-called information technology revolution. Her answer is that we need to