Observing "Man" *in Situ*: Edward Burnett Tylor's Travels through Mexico

Efram Sera Shriar, York University, esshriar@yorku.ca

> In the spring of 1856, I met Mr. Christy accidentally in an omnibus at Havana. He had been in Cuba for some months, leading an adventurous life… and visiting all sorts of people from whom information was to be had.[1]
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> —Edward Burnett Tylor, 1861

Introduction: The Canonization of "Tylor's Science" and Field Studies *Avant la Lettre*

Anthropologists have traditionally canonized Edward Burnett Tylor as the father of modern anthropology, referring to the discipline in the second half of the nineteenth century as "Tylor's science." Some have claimed that his contributions form the basis of many of the cultural theories still used by researchers today.[2] Tylor has been positioned as the great teacher of "civilization"; a term that was once interchangeable with "culture". He has been credited as the first practitioner to define the word, an innovator in sending his students into the field, as well as an occupational pioneer, devoting his career strictly to the study of human variation. His impact was already being recognized throughout the second half of the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century. For instance, in 1907, his close friend and fellow anthropologist Andrew Lang (1844-1912) argued that, "he who would vary from Mr. Tylor's ideas must do so in fear and trembling (as the present writer knows from experience)."[3] However, Tylor's often forgotten observational practices, incorporated into his methodological repertoire, were developed during his travels through Mexico, where he observed the indigenous populations of the region *in situ*. This is significant because it demonstrates an early attempt by an anthropological researcher to improve the quality of his ethnographic observations by engaging directly with his "object of study." Taking these travel experiences as its focus, the aim of this paper is to show how Tylor's journey through Mexico shaped his later anthropological writings. As we will see in due course, Tylor's training in anthropology was different to that of many of the leading ethnological and anthropological figures of the first half of the nineteenth century. Unlike his predecessors, he did not have a formal education in medicine or natural history. Instead, Tylor learnt about human variation on the spot through a chance encounter in 1856 with the ethnologist Henry Christy (1810-1865) whilst travelling through Cuba.

Learning to Observe: Tylor and his Journey through Mexico

Before Tylor became a dominant figure in the enterprise of anthropology, he followed a slightly different training regime from other researchers from the earlier part of the nineteenth century. Unlike ethnologists such as James Cowles Prichard (1786-1848),

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[1] Tylor, Edward Burnett, *Anahuac: or Mexico and the Mexicans, Ancient and Modern*, Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1861, 1

[2] For example see Stocking, George, *After Tylor: British Social Anthropology 1888-1951*, University of Wisconsin Press, 1995, 3-4

[3] Lang, Andrew, "Edward Burnett Tylor" from Balfour, Henry (ed.), *Anthropological Essays Presented to Edward Tylor in Honour of his 75th Birthday*, AMS Press, 1978, 1

Robert Gordon Latham (1812-1888) and William Lawrence (1783-1867), or anthropologists such as James Hunt (1833-1869) and Charles Carter Blake (1840?-1887), Tylor did not formally study medicine or natural history at university.[4] He was born into a middling-sort Quaker family and received most of his education from the Grove House School in Tottenham, which was operated by the Society of Friends. Many prominent ethnologists in the first half of the nineteenth century were Quakers—including Prichard and Thomas Hodgkin (1798-1866)—and their religious beliefs influenced many of the discipline's theories. In particular, the Quaker doctrine of the "inner light" was associated with the axiom that all humans are equal, a doctrine consistent with monogenism, or the theory of a single human ancestral origin.[5] For example, there are discernible religious undertones in the opening pages of Prichard's *Researches* in the 1813 edition, and subsequent editions were sustained his early views.[6] Thus, early on, Tylor was immersed in a culture in which issues relating to racial parity were at the forefront of communal discussions.

However, it was Tylor's travel experiences in the 1850s that principally shaped the foundation of his ethnological and anthropological writings. His initial interest in ethnology and natural history came from his older brother Alfred Tylor (1824-1884) who was an archaeologist, geologist and brass founder. Alfred had visited the United States and took up an interest in archaeology and geology. In 1846 he was elected a fellow of the Geological Society and was close friends with some influential naturalists such as Edward Forbes (1815-1854).[7] According to George Stocking, it was Alfred who introduced Tylor to ethnological topics and persuaded him to go abroad. After the death of his parents in 1852, Tylor began working in his family's foundry and within a few years developed tuberculosis forcing him to change careers. Alfred encouraged his younger brother to visit North America to clear his lungs, and in 1856, Tylor set out on a two-year trip.[8]

In the introduction of his travelogue entitled *Anahuac: or Mexico and the Mexicans, Ancient and Modern* (1861), Tylor wrote that he spent "the best part of a year" travelling the Mississippi River and observing the Native Americans and African slaves he encountered along the way. In addition, he lived for a short time on a sugar plantation in Louisiana before deciding to visit Cuba for a new adventure.[9] Nevertheless, it was a chance encounter with the ethnologist Henry Christy in Havana which brought Tylor's interests in human variation to the fore. There was much in common between Christy and Tylor. For instance, both were Quakers, grew up in London and came from

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[4] For more about the influence of medicine and natural history on Victorian anthropology see: Sera-Shriar, Efram, *Beyond the armchair: Early Observational Practices and the Making of British anthropology 1813-1871*, Ph.D. thesis, University of Leeds, 2011

[5] Isichei, Elizabeth, *Victorian Quakers,* Oxford University Press, 1970, 7 and Cantor, Geoffrey, *Quakers, Jews and Science: Religious Responses to Modernity and the Sciences in Britain 1650-1900*, Oxford University Press, 2005, 234-235

[6] Prichard, James Cowles, *Researches into the Physical History of Man,* John and Arthur Arch, 1813, 3-4

[7] George, W. H., "Tylor, Alfred (1824–1884)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004, 1

[8] Stocking, George, *Victorian Anthropology*, The Free Press, 1987, 157

[9] Tylor, Edward Burnett, *Anahuac: or Mexico and the Mexicans, Ancient and Modern*, Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1861, 1

middling-sort families. Moreover, they had similar educational backgrounds, having studied at schools operated by the Society of Friends. As such, they had a strong rapport when their relationship began. Christy would become Tylor's mentor over the course of the next ten years until his death in 1865. He would teach Tylor how to observe ethnological specimens *in situ*, as well as explain the major tenets of Prichardian ethnological monogenism. When the two first met in 1856, Christy invited Tylor to accompany him on a four-month horseback journey through Mexico.[10]

The aim of Christy and Tylor's excursion through Mexico was to collect as much ethnographic information as possible on the indigenous peoples. Once collected, this material could be organized, analyzed and reworked into ethnological studies on Mexicans. In the opening pages of his travelogue *Anahuac*, Tylor wrote,

> The journey and excursions in Mexico which have originated the narrative and remarks contained in this volume were made in the months of March, April, May, and June of 1856, for the most part on horseback. The author and his fellow-traveler enjoyed many advantageous opportunities of studying the country, the people, and the antiquities of Mexico, owing to the friendly assistance and hospitality which they received there. With this aid they were enabled to accomplish much more than usually falls to the lot of travelers in so limited a period; and they had the great advantage too, of being able to substantiate or correct their own observations by the local knowledge and experience of their friends and entertainers.[11]

Interestingly, Tylor emphasized how he and Christy immersed themselves in the Mexican culture, basing their analytical understanding of the society on "local knowledge and experience." In many ways this can be interpreted as a form of participant-observation *avant la lettre* because they were trying to see the world through the eyes of the natives. Moreover, Tylor began to develop his observational program by engaging directly with his object of study *in situ*.

In the early pages of his travelogue Tylor noted that Mexico was a remarkable place to conduct ethnological research. He argued that the substantial amount of archaeological evidence available throughout the countryside made it possible to trace the history of the indigenous peoples. Moreover, because many available ethnographic materials had been left untouched for centuries, they were valuable resources for ethnological museums in Britain. For instance, when visiting an Aztec site on one occasion, Tylor wrote that, "Everywhere the ground was full of unglazed pottery and obsidian; and we even found arrows and clay figures good enough for a museum."[12]

Tylor recognized that his primary experience travelling through Mexico and seeing the landscape through his own eyes reshaped his understanding of the region's history. For example, he stated that many British ethnologists were wrong in disputing the credibility of the Spanish reports from the sixteenth-century. In fact, Tylor believed that the

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[10] Stocking, George, *Victorian Anthropology*, The Free Press, 1987, 157

[11] Tylor, Edward Burnett, *Anahuac: or Mexico and the Mexicans, Ancient and Modern*, Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1861, iii

[12] Ibid: 147

Spanish chroniclers, if anything, underemphasized the affluence of the Aztec society. He wrote,

> When we left England, we both doubted the accounts of historians of the Conquest, believing that they had exaggerated the numbers of the population, and the size of the cities, from a natural desire to make the most of their victories…But our examination of Mexican remains soon induced us to withdraw this accusation, and even made us include to blame the chroniclers for having had no eyes for the wonderful things that surrounded them.[13]

Moreover, Tylor did not just look at materials from his saddle as he passed through an archaeological site; he would dismount from his horse and engage directly with material objects. For instance, when he visited the pyramids near Micaotli, he wrote that he "sat cross-legged on the ground" while members of the local community "brought many curious articles in clay and obsidian" to examine.[14]

In addition to writing about the history of the Mexican people, Tylor also discussed at length their contemporary state. He was surprisingly reflexive in his narrative and noted on several occasions that the Spanish colonists had had a detrimental impact on the indigenous communities. Tylor routinely highlighted instances in which the indigenous Mexican people were being subjugated and exploited by Europeans. For example, he wrote,

> At the city-gate [of Vera Cruz] stands a sentry – the strangest think I ever saw in the guise of a solder – a brown Indian of the coast, dressed in some rags that were a uniform once, shoeless, filthy in the extreme, and armed with an amazing old flint-lock. He is bad enough to look at, in all conscience, and really worse than he looks, for no doubt – he has been pressed into the service against his will, and hates white men and their ways with all his heart. Of course he will run away when he gets a chance; and, though he will be no great loss to service, he will add his mite to the feeling of hatred that has been growing up for these so many years among the brown Indians against the whites and the half-cast Mexicans.[15]

Tylor's reflexive description of this solider at the city-gate of Vera Cruz demonstrates his empathetic feelings for non-Europeans. It suggests that his upbringing by Quakers—with their humanistic views of indigenous populations—influenced his later ethnographic reflections.

Conclusion: Tylor's Lasting Influence

The point of this paper was to show how Tylor's travel experiences had a significant affect on his ethnological writing for several reasons. First, by travelling abroad and seeing indigenous peoples *in situ*, Tylor could claim an authoritative understanding of ethnological subjects and collect substantive data on which to base his research claims

[13] Ibid: 147
[14] Ibid: 148
[15] Ibid: 23

upon. Second, because he did not study medicine or natural history at a university, as many of his ethnological and anthropological counterparts had, his time in Mexico under the guidance of his mentor Christy can be seen as an intensive practical training course in ethnography. Third, Tylor came to recognize the importance of first-hand observation because it meant that researchers were not solely reliant on secondary accounts, which potentially misrepresented or underemphasized aspects of a culture.

When he returned to England in the late 1850s, Tylor's status quickly rose within the ethnological community. By the early 1860s he was becoming a leader of the Ethnological Society of London, developing close ties both with Thomas Huxley's younger circle of scientific naturalists, and with Hodgkin and Christy's older group of Prichardian monogenists.[16] Tylor even had connections with Hunt and the Anthropological Society of London, serving as the society's foreign secretary between 1863-1864 before—according to Stocking—he was enraged by Hunt's "pugnacious racism" which "offended his humanitarian Quaker beliefs."[17] In 1865, Tylor also published his first major ethnological work, *Researches into the Early History of Mankind and the Development of Civilisation*, a title chosen in order to indicate that it built upon Prichard's earlier work.[18]

It is significant that Tylor did not join Huxley and John Lubbock (1834-1913) in their attack on anthropology in the 1860s; because he distanced himself from these debates, Tylor was not a target of Hunt's staunch criticisms of the ethnological community. His conduct might explain why during the aftermath of the schism in the early 1870s Tylor was able to continue to build upon his first-rate reputation; he was not directly associated with either camp. At the beginning of the 1870s when the newly amalgamated anthropological community was looking for fresh leadership, he was able to acquire a leading role within the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain of Ireland. In addition, because his family owned a successful brass foundry, Tylor was able to devote himself entirely to the study of human diversity. This enabled him to produce many anthropological works throughout the second half of the nineteenth century and he was even appointed the first Reader in Anthropology at Oxford in 1884.

As the 1880s progressed Tylor's cultural approach to studying human diversity increasingly dominated the research field. He continued to develop new types of instructive literature for researchers and informants, as well as more sophisticated analytical techniques for making sense of data. For instance, in 1881 Tylor wrote the first anthropological textbook, which provided novice anthropologists with material designed to teach new researchers how to observe human diversity in a specialized

[16] Stocking, George, "What's in a Name? The Origins of the Royal Anthropological Institute (1837-71)," *Man*, 6, (1971), 369-390 and Kenny, Robert, "From the Curse of Ham to the Curse of Nature: The Influence of Natural Selection on the Debate on Human Unity before the Publication of the Descent of Man," *BJHS*, 40 (2007), 367-388

[17] Stocking, George, *Victorian Anthropology*, The Free Press, 1987, 159

[18] Stocking, George, *Delimiting Anthropology: Occasional Essays and Reflections*, University of Wisconsin Press, 2001, 108

way.[19] Furthermore, in 1888, he also published an article "On a Method of Investigating the Development of Institutions, Applied to Laws of Marriage and Descent," which explicated an observational technique that permitted interpretation of variation in social organization among different societies.[20] Other researchers built upon Tylor's cultural model, and from the 1870s onwards figures such as Edward Clodd (1840-1930) published significant folklore studies such as *The Childhood of Religions* (1887), which was grounded in Tylorian methodologies. During the same period, the anthropologist James Frazer (1854-1841) also recognized his debt to Tylor's writings; for example, Frazer based his theories of "totems," expounded in *Totemism* (1887) and *The Golden Bough* (1890), on principles Tylor outlined in *Primitive Culture* (1871).[21] Thus, the younger generation of cultural anthropologists were greatly influenced by Tylorian anthropology.[22]

[19] Tylor, Edward Burnett, *Anthropology: An Introduction to the Study of Man and Civilisation*, Macmillan, 1881 and Stocking, George, *Delimiting Anthropology: Occasional Essays and Reflections*, University of Wisconsin Press, 2001, 3

[20] Tylor, Edward Burnett, "On a Method of Investigating the Development of Institutions; Applied to Laws of Marriage and Descent," *Journal of the Anthropological Institute* 18 (1888), 245-272

[21] Tylor, Edward Burnett, *Primitive Culture, Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art and Custom,* vols. 1-2, John Murray, 1871; Clodd, Edward, *The Birth and Growth of Myth, and its Survival in Folk-lore, Legend and Dogman*, Sunday Lecture Society, 1875; Clodd, Edward, *The Childhood of Religions: Embracing a Simple Account of the Birth and Growth of Myths and Legends*, Henry S. King and Co., 1876; Frazer, James, *Totemism*, University of Edinburgh Press, 1887 and Frazer, James, *The Golden Bough: A Study of Magic and Religion*, Macmillan, 1890

[22] For more on Tylor's impact on anthropology see: Stocking, George, *After Tylor: British Social Anthropology 1888-1951*, University of Wisconsin Press, 1995