

### James G. Frazer

- 1854 Born in Glasgow, Scotland, the eldest of four children
- ? Attends Larchfield Academy where he develops a taste for Latin and Greek
- 1869 Matriculates University of Glasgow
- 1874 Graduates from Glasgow winning multiple honors. Enters Trinity College Cambridge, which would become a home for him for the rest of his life.
- 1878 Takes degree in Classics at Cambridge graduating second in his class. Travels to Germany where he comes to know and love the poetry of Heine.
- 1879 At his father's urging, takes up the study of law at the Inns of Court.
- 1882 Passes legal examinations and is admitted to the bar. He never practices.
- 1884 Meets William Robertson Smith, the brilliant Scottish biblical scholar and anthropologist, recently arrived at Cambridge. Smith introduces Frazer to anthropology and becomes his mentor and best friend. Frazer starts translation of Pausinias, a geographer and antiquary of second century Greece.
- 1885 At Smith's request, Frazer agrees to write articles on "Totemism" and "Taboo" for the Encyclopedia Britannica. Finds his niche: "the comparative anthropology of the 'primitive' mind and 'primitive' religion, with special attention to mythology.
- 1887 Publishes Totemism, his first small book which becomes a standard in a sparsely populated field.
- 1890 Publishes the first edition of The Golden Bough in two volumes. Makes first trip to Greece.
- 1894 Smith dies of tuberculosis, partly as a result of chronic overwork. Frazer feels the loss deeply.
- 1896 Marries Elizabeth Grove nee Adelsdorfer, a Frenchwoman of an Alsatian family. The two remain devoted to each other for the rest of their lives.
- 1898 Publishes Pausinias in six volumes.
- 1890 Second edition of The Golden Bough in three volumes.

- 1904 Undertakes the study of Hebrew to add to his list of foreign languages (Greek, Latin, French, German, Dutch, Italian, and Spanish).
- 1910 Publishes Totemism and Exogamy in four volumes, which in turn inspires Freud's Totem and Taboo (1913).
- 1911-15 Third edition of The Golden Bough in twelve volumes.
- 1914 Accepts knightship largely to gratify his wife who revelled in being called Lady Frazer.
- 1918 Publishes Folk-Lore in The Old Testament.
- 1931 Goes blind presumably from ruptured blood vessels in his eyes. Beginning of slow decline.
- 1941 Dies at the age of 85. His wife dies several hours after he does.

#### Family Background and Temperament

Like his father, James was 5'3'' tall, was abstemious and enjoyed good health and long life. His parents were both religious; he describes his father as a "staunch Presbyterian and free churchman." James himself came to be opposed to religion in general and Christianity in particular, but it does not appear that he had any direct religious conflict with his parents during his youth. He stayed connected with his family his whole life.

The family was middle class. His father, an outgoing man, was a druggist and was active in politics. James was from an early age shy and bookish. He read voluminously starting with the books on his father's shelf which included Sir Walter Scott, John Calvin, Don Quixote, and the Arabian Nights. By the age of 22, James had an uncommonly wide command of the Greek and Latin classics in the original. He loved literature and his favorite poets were Heine and William Cowpers.

James was noted for his broad and deep learning, his remarkable powers of concentration, and a boundless energy that kept him working over thirteen hours a day (7 days a week, 50 weeks a year) throughout most of his long life. Despite his great talents, he generally lacked self-confidence. He was very much of a rationalist and had trouble showing his emotions.

#### The Golden Bough

The book is essentially a speculative historical reconstruction of a distant period in human mental evolution. The first edition is an examination of primitive Aryan religion and is expanded to worldwide scope in later editions.

Frazer hoped to reach both the expert audience and the general reader. He received very favorable reviews from both quarters. The

importance of the book was as much literary as scholarly, in that it showed that the controversial subject of the history of religion could be made accessible in a nonpolemical way to a general audience by a writer whose style was marked by elegance, visual vividness, irony, and self assurance. Indeed, inasmuch as modern anthropologists now widely discredit the scientific methods used by Frazer and most of his contemporaries, the lasting value of the book is literary. (Frazer was not dogmatic. He recognized that his own theories and speculations were all provisional, likely to be replaced by better ones, and hoped that his works might endure as storehouses of data.)

The book's impact on literature has been profound with such writers as W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot, D.H. Lawrence, James Joyce and Ezra Pound all drawing inspiration from it. Frazer was instrumental in bringing the issues raised by anthropology into the world's view.

### The Book's "Plot"

The book's ostensible purpose is to explain the origins of the priesthood at Nemi as Frazer mentions in a letter to his publisher in 1886:

"By an application of the comparative method I believe I can make probable that the priest represented in his person the god of the grove - Virbius - and that his slaughter was regarded as the death of the god. This raises the question of a wide spread custom of killing men and animals regarded as divine... The Golden Bough, I believe I can show, was the mistletoe, and the whole legend can I think, be brought into connexion, on the one hand, with the Druidical reverence for the mistletoe and the human sacrifices accompanying their worship, and, on the other hand, with the Norse legend of the death of Balder... [W]hatever may be thought of [the book's] theories it will be found, I believe, to contain a large store of very curious customs, many of which may be new to professed anthropologists. The resemblance of many of the savage customs and ideas to the fundamental doctrines of Christianity is striking. But I make no reference to this parallelism, leaving my readers to draw their own conclusions, one way or the other."

### Frazer's Main Thesis

For Frazer, human consciousness is the product of lengthy evolution. Primitive mentality represents one point low down on the development line; modern consciousness another point higher on the same line.

Magic --> Religion --> Science --> ? (the future)

Frazer's draws his insight from Darwin, whose book The Origin

of Species (1859) engendered religious skepticism and shaped the whole intellectual climate of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The pressing question of the day, not just for Frazer but for nearly all intellectuals, was the origin of religion and morality. Frazer was a rationalist and sought to discredit modern religion by showing that its beliefs and practices were deeply rooted in superstition and error: e.g. human sacrifice, primitive magic, and mistaken notions of cause and effect. Frazer does not look at religion in the larger social context or as a means of meeting human emotional needs (as does his contemporary William James in The Varieties of Religious Experience). Instead, he sees belief as an intellectual problem of the individual mind: the primitive mind is motivated by fear of surroundings, and religion is a response to this fear.

### Sources

These notes draw freely from the following:

J.G. Frazer: His Life and Work, Robert Ackerman, Cambridge University Press, 1987.

The Literary Impact of The Golden Bough, John B. Vickery, Princeton University Press, 1973.

A History of Anthropological Thought, Sir Edward Evans-Pritchard, Basic Books, 1981.

The Golden Bough, 1 volume abridged edition, Sir James G. Frazer, Macmillan, 1922.