

CHAPTER VII  
THE MELANESIAN MISSION AND VICTORIAN ANTHROPOLOGY

A Symbiotic Relationship

When William H. R. Rivers, one of the first anthropologists to undertake field work in Melanesia, expressed his admiration of the Melanesian Mission which tempered "missionary zeal of the old-fashioned kind . . . by a wise application of anthropological lore and methods,"<sup>1</sup> he recognized a pattern characteristic of the Mission from the days of Patteson and Codrington. Rivers's own Essays on the Depopulation of Melanesia in which he established the relationship between the psychological trauma of cultural disruption and depopulation included essays by three members of the Mission staff. These three--Walter J. Durrad, W. C. Ferrall and Arthur Innes Hopkins--all published ethnographic studies of their own as did Walter Ivens, a member of the Royal Anthropological Institute as well as missionary with years of service in Melanesia. Durrad was singled out in Rivers's The History of Melanesian Society as an invaluable collaborator who not only aided Rivers in the field but continued to supply him with information after his return to England.<sup>2</sup> Charles Fox, who had taken a geology degree

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<sup>1</sup>William H. R. Rivers, Essays on the Depopulation of Melanesia (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922), p. vi.

<sup>2</sup>William H. R. Rivers, The History of Melanesian Society, 2 vols. (Oosterhout, The Netherlands: Anthropological Publications, 1968. First published, 1914), 1:2.

in New Zealand before his association with the Mission, worked closely with Rivers and further developed his (Rivers's) diffusionist theories of the origin of Pacific island cultures in his The Threshold of the Pacific (1924). The definitive nineteenth-century ethnographic and linguistic studies of Melanesia were the work of the headmaster of St. Barnabas, Robert Codrington. What was the basis of the easy, comfortable relationship between the Melanesian Mission and anthropology; a discipline whose modern identity established itself in precisely the same time frame that the Mission worked out its own goals and methods?

Missionaries had always been a primary source of information about exotic cultures. Because of their prolonged encounter with "the other" and their need to understand at least a modicum of his culture and language, if only in the pragmatic service of conversion, missionaries often became effective ethnographers. Through their reports and publicity efforts, they served as important disseminators of information about the people they served. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, their near monopoly on these roles was challenged by the new social science of anthropology, a discipline not always sympathetic to these "determined Christians." The potential for conflict between the two groups most actively interested in primitive cultures stemmed in part from the claims to the "scientific" put forth from the beginning by anthropology. The Anthropological Society of London, founded in 1863, declared its chief object to be "the study of Anthropology in a strictly scientific manner"<sup>3</sup> and the encouragement of all research leading to

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<sup>3</sup>J. W. Burrow, Evolution and Society: A Study of Victorian Social Theory (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), p. xlii.

a "science of man."<sup>4</sup> A sampling of the papers given at the Society indicates that the nature and method of that science lacked clear definition. Speakers addressed such varied issues as "The Gypsies in Egypt," "Abnormal Distension of the Wrist," "Human Hair as a Race Character" and "Danish Kitchen Middens." But if method and subject matter constituted a hazy area for the early exponents of a science of man, they had no problem defining what it was not and systematically barred the use of religious arguments and biblical evidence from their proceedings.<sup>5</sup>

As anthropology developed, more specific areas of conflict became apparent. Missionaries and anthropologists simply differed in what they ultimately needed from primitive culture; a difference exacerbated in the 1920s by the functionalist approach to the study of culture developed by Bronislaw Malinowski and Alfred Radcliffe-Brown. Functionalism assumed that all elements of a social system played a critical role in maintaining social equilibrium. The loss of any one element, and particularly one as critical as religion, threatened the entire structure. Needless to say, the dynamics of Christian mission had limited appeal for the anthropologist committed to a closed model system.<sup>6</sup>

Yet despite their differences anthropology and mission had considerable common ground. The missionary had to address the question

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 119.      <sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Kenelm Burridge, "Missionary Occasions" in Mission, Church and Sect in Oceania, ed. James Boutelier (New York: University Press of America, 1978), p. 78.

of human cultural diversity on some level if only to integrate that diversity with the Christian universalist ideal.<sup>7</sup> Both missionaries and anthropologists shared the Western penchant for encountering and incorporating "the other," whether however, the association between mission and anthropology extended beyond these rather abstract affinities to an active working relationship.<sup>8</sup>

Members of the Melanesian Mission staff, in addition to their own ethnographic work, served as important resources for some of the pioneer figures of British anthropology. The collaboration between W. H. R. Rivers and members of the mission early in the twentieth century has already been noted. Much earlier, the philologist and specialist in comparative religion, Max Mueller, corresponded with both Bishop Patteson and Robert Codrington. Codrington also exchanged views with Edward Tylor and attended his lectures, although he did not always agree with Tylor's conclusions. Codrington's data not only provided an important part of the basis of Tylor's theories of exogamy and classificatory relationships but was eventually utilized by R. R. Marett, Tylor's student and Oxford colleague, in his revision of Tylor's theory of the evolution of religious forms.<sup>9</sup> Codrington himself

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., pp. 1-5.

<sup>8</sup>James Clifford, Person and Myth: Maurice Leenhardt in the Melanesian World (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p. 126.

<sup>9</sup>George W. Stocking, Victorian Anthropology (New York: The Free Press, 1987).

presented papers at the Anthropological Society, one of whose original members was John Selwyn, later to be the second bishop of Melanesia.<sup>10</sup>

The penchant of Victorian anthropology for utilizing the missionary informant is not as strange as it might seem, given the new discipline's claims to the "scientific." In the case of Melanesian Mission, whose highly educated leadership was disposed to think of indigenous culture as a legitimate manifestation of the Divine Spirit, there was little inherent reason to distrust the objectivity of the missionary source. Besides, the use of reasonably trustworthy informants had pragmatic advantages. Until the 1890s, British anthropology remained largely the anthropology of the study, if not the armchair.<sup>11</sup> If such an approach seems suspect from a modern perspective conditioned by concepts of intensive fieldwork and first-hand observation, Victorian science supplied numerous precedents. The legitimacy of comparative inquiry based on data collected by those only secondarily involved in the scientific task (e.g., travelers, missionaries and colonial administrators) enjoyed wide acceptance.<sup>12</sup> Nothing prevented those involved in anthropology from utilizing the missionary informant provided the missionary furnished reasonably accurate descriptions of the culture he observed. Those descriptions would, Edward Tylor thought, provide the scholar of culture with the patterns and comparisons needed to form a proper theoretical framework.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Burrow, Evolution and Society, p. 125.      <sup>11</sup>Ibid., pp. 82-83.

<sup>12</sup>Stocking, Victorian Anthropology, pp. 108-9.

<sup>13</sup>Edward Tylor, The Origins of Primitive Culture (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1958. First published 1871), p. 9.

Perhaps the more compelling question is the matter of the affinity that determined Christians, ultimately bent on the moral and the transcendent, felt for the new science of man. The answer lies in the nature of Victorian anthropology itself. For while the Anthropological Society of London might confidently declare the complete feasibility of the scientific study of man, in fact the second half of the nineteenth century constituted a period of uncertainty and confusion for the infant social science. The strong empirical bent of British science and the impact of evolutionary, developmental concepts undoubtedly formed the basis for anthropological inquiry in this period. But that did not leave this man-centered discipline immune from the confusion created by the demise of the old intellectual certainties. However determined one might be to study man scientifically, no one really knew how to go about it.<sup>14</sup> And, in common with a host of others caught up in the Victorian intellectual crisis, the pioneers of anthropological thought required some reassurance that human life on earth meant something more than the end product of random Darwinian processes. In the methodology of German idealist thought (i.e., the comparative historical method derived from philology and the concept of progressive stages of development) they found--as had the Liberal Anglican thinkers--the means of establishing a view of man that was simultaneously "scientific" and "progressive."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Burrow, Evolution and Society, pp. 132-33.

<sup>15</sup>Stocking, Victorian Anthropology, p. 325.

In its search for new answers, then, anthropology exhibited the eclectic, unspecialized and unsystematic patterns that characterized Victorian intellectual life in general. The leading figures in its early development--men like Max Mueller, Sir Henry Maine and Edward Tylor--were not, and indeed could not be, specialists trained in the discipline. The products of an educational system designed to produce broadly-educated individuals for management of the economy, the state and the Church, they were, in a very real sense, amateurs vis-à-vis the new discipline.<sup>16</sup> Even late in the century, when British anthropology had begun to assume a more distinct identity, it continued to be characterized by a significant degree of "role-hybrids"; that is to say by individuals who began their professional lives in another field and came to anthropology only as their interest in more speculative matters grew.<sup>17</sup> A. C. Haddon, for example, who held the first readership in ethnology at Cambridge and organized the Torres Straits Expedition, worked originally as a zoologist. W. H. R. Rivers began his professional life as a neurologist. Jane Harrison, the source of critical ideas on the interrelationship of myth and ritual in culture, was a classicist.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Morse Peckham, Victorian Revolutionaries: Speculations on Some Heroes of a Cultural Crises (New York: George Brazitter, 1970), p. 209.

<sup>17</sup>Ian Langham, The Building of British Social Anthropology: W.H.R. Rivers and his Cambridge Disciples in the Development of Kinship Studies, 1898-1931 (London: D. Reidel Publishing Co., 1981), p. 51.

<sup>18</sup>Richard Slobodin, W. H. R. Rivers (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), pp. 27-28.

As an academic discipline, anthropology had tenuous claims at best until the turn of the century. Oxford established its first readership in anthropology in 1884 with the position becoming a chair in 1896. Cambridge did not follow suit with a readership until 1909 even though both the Torres Straits Expedition (1898) and the Percy Slade Trust Expedition (1907), the earliest British anthropological expeditions, both had been organized under its auspices.<sup>19</sup>

While advances in the natural sciences--and particularly the impact of Darwinian evolutionary theory--provided the chief context for the development of Victorian anthropology, the new "science of man" did not represent a radical departure from the broad concerns of Victorian intellectual life. The training of its early practitioners, the problems that interested them most, and the methodology they employed in approaching those problems all formed part of the common ground they shared with other serious, critically-minded men, including those determined Christians unwilling to be merely credulous. Anthropological inquiry did not then express itself in either systematically evolutionary or particularly revolutionary terms.<sup>20</sup> In their own struggle to deal with the changing intellectual paradigm of the second half of the nineteenth century the pioneer figures of English anthropology focused on many of the same issues that concerned the leadership of the Melanesian Mission and utilized methods entirely familiar to

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 130.

<sup>20</sup>Stocking, Victorian Anthropology, p. 138.



them. If Sir Henry Main approached, as J. W. Burrow has suggested, the study of society, not as a professional scientist with a formula, but as a classical scholar with direct experience in a country with a culture alien to its governors,<sup>21</sup> his vantage point did not differ markedly from that of Codrington or Patteson.

#### Victorian Anthropology and the Origin of Civilization

Perhaps the most important of these shared concerns was the problem of the origin and development of civilization. The critical nature of this issue for missionaries attempting both to come to terms with "the other" and to assess the relationship of a theoretically universal faith with its parent civilization has already been noted. Any clarification of these issues had relevance for those who had to balance the civilized and the primitive in the daily exercise of their affairs. From the missionary's perspective, the speculations of Victorian anthropology offered the comforting possibility of a theoretical explanation for what they encountered in the field. But this does not explain the preoccupation of anthropology itself with the question of civilization.

George W. Stocking, in the most recent examination of Victorian anthropology, has suggested a two-part answer; one reflecting both the unease and the self-confidence of the Victorian era. Civilization, in a sense, formed the only possible cushion from the inexorable forces of a new Darwinian Nature. Although man had his origins in Nature

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<sup>21</sup>Burrow, Evolution and Society, p. 158.

and remained part of it, civilization, to a degree, put him at some remove from its forces and gave him some control over it.<sup>22</sup> Conversely, by the mid-nineteenth century, an expansive economy, empire, and a sense of confidence rooted in both Evangelical and Utilitarian fervor combined to make "civilization" a working assumption of Victorian society. Its most problematic feature for educated men lay less in its failures and discontents than in an adequate explication of its origins and development.

Consequently, anthropological inquiry shifted from the problem of human unity favored by both Christian thinkers and eighteenth-century rationalists to that of the origin of human civilization. Methodological and conceptual innovations in both history and the natural sciences--e.g., historicism, uniformitarianism and evolution--reinforced the change. Gradually, the natural history of man began to be interpreted less in terms of movement in space and more as development in time. "The regularity of the cultural evolutionary ladder," says Stocking, "was superimposed upon the irregular outlines of the ethnological tree as the governing visual metaphor."<sup>23</sup>

This emphasis on the "cultural evolutionary ladder" determined the nature of the Victorian approach to the study of primitive cultures. As functioning social systems with complex, interrelated cultural form, they rated at best passing interest. But as exemplars of the stages and processes of human cultural development, they proved invaluable.

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<sup>22</sup>Stocking, Victorian Anthropology, p. 325.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 77.

"No one who can see," wrote Tylor, ". . . how direct and close the connexion may be between modern culture and the condition of the rudest savage, will be prone to accuse students who spend their labour on even the lowest and most trifling facts of ethnography, of wasting their hours in the satisfaction of a frivolous curiosity."<sup>24</sup> Primitive cultures could, in short, shed light on the manner in which "the ape had developed into the British gentleman."<sup>25</sup>

The inquiry into the nature and development of civilization, the prominence of religion in that inquiry, the conviction that human cultural response remained the same across time, and the idealistic sense of "true progress" in human history all served, then to provide points of affinity between the early leaders of anthropology and key figures in the Melanesian Mission. For at least the first thirty years after the emergence of anthropology as an independent discipline, they also shared a common methodology in the comparative historical approach derived principally from philology. This commonality of interests is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in the relationship between Max Mueller and Bishop Patteson and Robert Codrington.

Mueller, who had a thorough grounding in the traditions of German idealist philosophy, was, in 1860, indisputedly the foremost authority on language and myth in England. He had introduced comparative philology at Oxford, translated the Indian classics, and was a

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<sup>24</sup>Tylor, The Origins of Culture, p. 159.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 185.

widely-known and popular lecturer. Like many nineteenth-century scholars, he used his specialized scholarly interests in conjunction with broader issues, such as the origin and function of religion and the origins of social structure. Of language, he wrote: "Language stands in the system of the intellectual world as light stands in the system of the physical world, comprising all, and revealing all."<sup>26</sup> In a lecture entitled "On the Stratification of Language" given in 1868, he further developed the thesis that in philology, as in geology, stratifications forming a chronological series could be observed. Because these stratifications could be studied simultaneously, philologists could analyze the development of language from its inception.<sup>27</sup> Thus the scientific study of language became the best possible approach to the study of human prehistory. Mueller indeed presented the argument at Oxford that philology should be numbered as one of the natural sciences.<sup>28</sup> Tylor echoed these sentiments in The Origin of Culture in 1871: "The study of language has, perhaps, done more than any other in removing from our view of human thought and action the ideas of chance and arbitrary invention, and in substituting for them a theory of development . . . through processes ever reasonable and intelligible where the facts are fully known."<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>Max Mueller, quoted in Nirad C. Chaudhuai, Scholar Extraordinary: The Life of Professor the Rt. Hon. Friedrich Max Müller (London: Chatto and Windus, 1974), p. 82.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 185-86.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>29</sup>Tylor, Origin of Culture, p. 18.

In keeping with his conviction that language study constituted a science, Mueller saw its development in terms of the same patterns which characterized the physical sciences--i.e., data collection, classification of data and, finally, theoretical extrapolation.<sup>30</sup> For the first two steps, Mueller required the assistance of those in direct contact with the languages and mythological systems of contemporary primitive cultures. He turned to Bishop Patteson and Robert Codrington, both of whom he knew before they went out to Melanesia. It was, he wrote to Patteson in 1865, only through "savage" languages that one could hope to fully understand the mysterious process of change in language as literary languages could be completely misleading on this point.<sup>31</sup> Mueller also relied heavily on reports from Codrington in formulating the principal thesis of his Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion (1878). Using Codrington's description of the Melanesian perception of mana as evidence, Mueller speculated that all religion is based on the universal ability of the human mind to grasp the Infinite.<sup>32</sup>

Patteson appears to have done his best for Mueller given the demands on his time and energy. He had, he replied to Mueller's queries, to learn languages for very practical reasons and simply

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<sup>30</sup>Chaudhuai, Scholar Extraordinary, p. 188.

<sup>31</sup>Robert Codrington Collection, Rhodes House Library, Oxford. Series 29, letter from Mueller to Bishop Patteson, 1865.

<sup>32</sup>Ernst Cassirer, Language and Myth (New York: Harper, 1946), p. 80.

couldn't spend a great deal of time informing the literati at home of the fine points of dialectic variation.<sup>33</sup> But his comments elsewhere indicate an involvement with language study that went far beyond the purely pragmatic. His own language training was extensive, encompassing German and Hebrew as well as the standard Greek and Latin. He knew Mueller from his Oxford days and continued to read his work in Melanesia.<sup>34</sup> And like Mueller, he was engaged in the hands-on process of ordering the various elements of language and attempting to derive from that process an accurate understanding of meaning. He worked on at least twenty Melanesian languages in his rather brief lifetime;<sup>35</sup> an effort which fostered a profound respect for the complexity and expressiveness of "primitive" language and a highly cautious approach to translation. "Don't," he warned, "attempt to use words as (assumed) equivalents of abstract ideas."<sup>36</sup>

Robert Codrington shared Patteson's appreciation of the Melanesian accomplishment. Writing on the philology and ethnology of Melanesia in 1875--and complaining of his lack of time to pursue these interests--he pointed out that a Melanesian language spoken on a small island by only a thousand or so people had, nonetheless, a vocabulary and grammar of such complexity that a man of average education and

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<sup>33</sup>Charlotte M. Yonge, Life of John Coleridge Patteson, 2 vols. (London: MacMillan and Co., 1874) 2:187.

<sup>34</sup>Patteson Papers, Selwyn Collection, Selwyn College Library, Cambridge, 1866.

<sup>35</sup>Yonge, 2, p. 135.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., p. 191.

intelligence would require a long period to master it. Patteson, he recalled, used to become quite angry with those who maintained that the speech of savages could not properly be called language. Codrington himself thought it worth the notice of educated men that ". . . there is a great deal of scholarship in a savage tongue. Why is it, again, that among savages in an uncultivated and unwritten language, you never find anyone who says anything incorrect . . . ? And are people properly savages whose language is so exact?"<sup>37</sup>

For Patteson and Codrington--or for Max Mueller--the answer was a definitive "no." Their recognition of Melanesian speech patterns as full-fledged languages reconfirmed their conviction of the essential unity of mankind. Christianity incorporated "the other" into the family of man through its recognition of his immortal soul. The recognition of the completeness of his language provided in part by Victorian anthropology served to confirm that place. For the Melanesian Mission, persuaded as it was that islanders could both comprehend the fundamental universal truth of the faith and incorporate them in a meaningful manner into their own culture, the "proof" of their mental and spiritual faculties provided by language was most welcome. In the case of language, the mesh between their own observations in the field, their theological proclivities, and the theoretical direction of early Victorian anthropology proved almost perfect.

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<sup>37</sup>Codrington Papers, Series 9, printed letter to Mr. Freeling, 1875.

"The language of a savage People," wrote Codrington," is the most conspicuous product of their mental power. People in the least advanced condition as to civilization have language; and their language is never found in a condition corresponding to the backward state of their arts of life."<sup>38</sup> Hence even if the Melanesian peoples did not, tragically, survive the forces acting upon them, they had, through their language, been recognized ". . . as members of the common brotherhood, partakers in the aspirations and capacities which other races have been enabled to develop and exercise, not always by better qualities but by better fortune."<sup>39</sup>

Language, then, played a key role in assigning Melanesians and other primitive peoples a place in the human brotherhood. For Edward Tylor and Sir Henry Maine, two pioneer figures of nineteenth-century anthropology whose work Patteson also read in Melanesia, this inclusive view could be further documented by a developmental concept of human progress and the use of comparative historical methods. Tylor, for example, came from a Quaker background and approached the study of man with a certain missionary zeal.<sup>40</sup> He utilized the developmental concept and the comparative method to combat the popular--but in Tylor's view pernicious--degeneration theory of primitive culture. He set out to provide evidence that the rational human will have essentially the same response to the same conditions. The universality of

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<sup>38</sup>Codrington Papers, Series A, printed article, "The Language of a Savage People."

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., pp. 283-84.

<sup>40</sup>Peckham, p. 186.



particular myths seemed, to Tylor, a case in point.<sup>41</sup> ". . . the facts collected," he wrote in his Researches into the Early History of Mankind and the Development of Civilization, "seem to favour the view that the wide differences in the civilization and mental state of the various races of mankind are rather differences of development than of origin, rather of degree than of kind."<sup>42</sup>

For Sir Henry Maine, the mythological record contained the moral and metaphysical conceptions that influenced all successive developments, including law. "These rudimentary ideas are to the jurist," Maine said, "what the primary crusts of the earth are to the geologist . . . ."<sup>43</sup> The observation of contemporary primitive societies--whose existence he, like Tylor, attributed to different races of human social development--provided the best means, of establishing the basis of the social state. This invaluable resource for understanding social order had, regrettably, been neglected; a fact Maine attributed to fear, religious prejudice and the very use of the terms "civilization" and "barbarian." As long, in short, as observers perceived primitive cultures in terms of differences in kind and not degree, they would fail to grasp the significance of what they saw.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup>Abram Kardiner and Edward Preble, They Studied Man (New York: Mentor Books, 1961), pp. 59-60.

<sup>42</sup>Edward Tylor, Researches into the Early History of Mankind and the Development of Civilization (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964. First published 1865), p. 232.

<sup>43</sup>Sir Henry Maine, Ancient Law (Dorset Press, 1986. First published 1861), p. 2.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 99-100.

Maine would have had little cause to complain of the Melanesian Mission on this score. Patteson showed every inclination to see Melanesian culture in comparative and developmental terms. As he came to know island languages, he compared them to Hebrew. The central, though often overlooked, fact of Hebrew, he wrote to the Bishop of Salisbury in 1871, has to be that it was basically the spoken language of an illiterate people, written down eventually without manipulation by an educated elite. To approximate the meaning of the ancient Hebrews required shedding a good many modes of thought and expression of the civilized mentality. Many contemporary peoples thought and spoke in the manner of the ancient Hebrews, among them the islanders of Melanesia.<sup>45</sup> Both groups revealed the mode of expression of men still in a fairly early stage of cultural development.<sup>46</sup> Yet it would hardly have occurred to Patteson or his contemporaries to question the spiritual insights contained in the Old Testament.

Nor was language Patteson's sole source for the comparative method. He identified in contemporary European civilization survivals of earlier practices; an idea utilized by Edward Tylor as well. Hence the custom of ladies withdrawing at the end of a meal had some relationship to Melanesian "tapus" on dining with women, and the Odd Fellows, trade unions and Freemasons stemmed from the same impulse as primitive secret societies.<sup>47</sup> And while Patteson would hardly have been prepared to

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<sup>45</sup>Yonge, 2, p. 504.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., p. 475.

<sup>47</sup>Patteson Papers, SPG Collection, 1867.

view the Last Supper as a mere survival, he did understand its relationship to the feast as it existed in primitive culture. "The Last Supper," he wrote in 1867, "whatever higher and deeper meanings it may have has this simple but most significant meaning to the primitive of feasting or of a child with his brothers and sisters at his Father's Board . . . this privilege of membership, strengthening the tie, a familiarizing oneself more and more with the thoughts and customs of that Heavenly Family--this surely is a very great deal of what human instincts as exhibited in almost universal customs required."<sup>48</sup>

Insofar, then, as a developing anthropology focused on the common elements in the dizzying diversity of human culture, its affinity with mission is readily apparent. R. R. Marett wrote of his mentor, Edward Tylor: "The need of his age was to proclaim that mankind is a many in one, with the emphasis on the one."<sup>49</sup> While the "one" was defined for the Melanesian Mission primarily in terms of the Christian universalist ideal, its intellectual leadership had every reason to welcome the reinforcement provided by the science of man.

That same leadership, however, parted company with those early anthropologists who saw human cultural development in terms of strict determinist and racialist patterns. Patteson read the French scholar,

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<sup>48</sup>Patteson Papers, SPG Collection, 1867.

<sup>49</sup>R. R. Marett, Tylor quoted in Burrow, Evolution and Society, p. 251.

G. Pouchet's The Plurality of Races "with much dispute" in 1866.<sup>50</sup> Pouchet, a medical doctor, a member of the Anthropological Society of Paris and a corresponding member of the Anthropological Society of London, insisted on speciation within the human race. In his speciation concept, intellectual inequality figured prominently: a "fact" he supported by citing missionary reports concerning the total lack of religious perception to be found among Australian Aborigines, African blacks, and Eskimoes. "We must," he proclaimed, "distrust those minds which begin by declaring a priori the universality of beliefs, hopes, and fears among mankind, as a natural consequence of the primitive unity of the human species."<sup>51</sup> Small wonder that Patteson, who as early as 1856 had ". . . quite learnt to believe that there are no 'savages' anywhere, at least among black or coloured people,"<sup>52</sup> read Pouchet with distrust.

This distrust is also apparent in Robert Codrington's response to the conclusions of another strict evolutionist, Sir John Lubbock (Lord Avebury). Lubbock had much closer connections to evolutionary biology than men like Tylor or Maine, and his view of the human social condition contained decidedly hierarchical and determinist overtones. In almost every respect, "civilized" and uncivilized races, Lubbock

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<sup>50</sup>Patteson Papers, Selwyn Collection, 1866.

<sup>51</sup>G. Pouchet, The Plurality of Races (London: Publishing Committee of the London Anthropological Society, 1866), p. 69.

<sup>52</sup>Yonge, 1, p. 301.

believed, exhibited marked differences. Primitive language illustrated the case, lacking as it did, the means of expressing abstract concepts. In his Prehistoric Times, he cited the futile efforts of the St. Petersburg Bible Society to translate basic Christian texts into the language of Siberian indigenes; a failure caused by ". . . the language being entirely deficient in words to express new and abstract ideas, and partly for want of letters to convey the variety of strange and uncouth sounds of which the language itself consists . . . ." <sup>53</sup>

Nor did Lubbock consider primitive man capable of creating anything which could properly be called religion. It was possible, judging from the accounts of travellers and missionaries, to establish a pattern of increasing complexity in the primitive response to the unseen and the unknown. At the lowest level, Australian Aborigines exhibited ". . . a mere unreasoning belief in the existence of mysterious beings." <sup>54</sup> Fetichism, animism, idolatry and anthropomorphism represented important elaborations in this response, but they could not properly be called religion. "How . . . , " he asked, "can a people who are unable to count their own fingers possibly raise their mind so far as to realize the difficult problems of religion?" <sup>55</sup>

Having constructed this rather pessimistic view of primitive abilities, Lubbock assured his readers that "their real condition is

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<sup>53</sup>Sir John Lubbock, Lord Avebury, Prehistoric Times (Oosterhout, The Netherlands: Anthropological Publications, 1969. First published 1865), p. 566.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., p. 574.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., p. 573.

even worse and more abject than that which I have endeavoured to depict."<sup>56</sup>; a condition he attributed, in the final analysis, to natural selection. "The great principle of natural selection which in animals affects the body and seems to have little influence on the mind, in man affects the mind and has little influence on the body. In the first, it tends mainly to the preservation of life; in the second, to the improvement of the mind, and consequently to the increase of happiness."<sup>57</sup> For Lubbock, the evolutionary, ultimately progressive process of human development had passed the "savage" by. A study of primitive culture might provide some insight into pre-history and had a certain utility in terms of the proper management of indigenes in the British Empire, but it could hardly inform civilized man.

Articles by Codrington and Lubbock respectively appeared in the same learned journal on at least one occasion; an interesting commentary on the unsettled character of Victorian anthropology, for they could hardly have been further removed from each other in their view of primitive culture.<sup>58</sup> "I confess," Codrington wrote in 1875, "that the savage of books does not come my way. As I read Sir John Lubbock, for example, and find that such and such is the case with savages, I come to the conclusion that our people are not savages . . . ."<sup>59</sup> Their language not only had the same complexity and subtlety of

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<sup>56</sup>Ibid., p. 577.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., p. 593.

<sup>58</sup>Journal of the Anthropological Institute 10, 1880-81.

<sup>59</sup>Codrington Papers, Series 9, printed letter to Mr. Freeling, 1875.

"civilized" tongues but had a strong aesthetic appeal as well. The Psalms could be translated into Mota, and those translations, to Codrington's ear were, ". . . as lofty in their diction and as harmonious in their rhythm . . . as anything . . . in any language."<sup>60</sup>

As to religion, the very practices that Lubbock cited as proof of inferiority provided Codrington with proof of the universality of human religious responses and hope for the eventual success of the Christian message. The Melanesian, he noted, lived on easy terms with the invisible world, certain that the body did not represent all of himself and confident of his ability to communicate with unseen powers and enlist their aid.

It is not wise for any teacher of true religion to neglect or despise, even he must abhor them, the superstitious beliefs and rites of those whom he would lead from darkness to light. It is far better, if it be possible, to search for and recognize what is true and good among wild and foul superstitions; to find the common foundation, if such there be, which lies in human nature itself, ready for the superstructure of the Gospel. It may surely be said that no missionary who knows and loves his people will ever fail to find their foundation, even among the lowest races of mankind, or find himself utterly unable to say to them: "Whom ye ignorantly worship, Him I declare unto you."<sup>61</sup>

Without the "common foundation," the truth of the Christian message, Codrington thought, would not be recognized and consequently

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<sup>60</sup> Miscellaneous Papers relating to the Melanesian Mission. National Library of Australia and the Library of New South Wales. AJCP microfilm #802-806.

<sup>61</sup> Robert Codrington, "Religious Beliefs and Practices in Melanesia," Journal of the Anthropological Institute 10 (1880-81), p. 312.

would have no influence. However morally limited indigenous belief systems might be,

. . . there is the belief, found among all savage people, in the existence of the soul, and in its continued existence after death; there is the feeling, over and above the desire to obtain what will be useful in this world from spirits, that communication with the unseen world is a thing to be desired in itself. A savage people, if such are to be found, who have no appetite for intercourse with the invisible, would fail to supply to a missionary a fulcrum by which, when it exists, they may be raised to a higher level. The man who believes he has a soul, and that death is but a change of existence, and that unseen spiritual influence is at work upon him, is in a more receptive condition as regards Christianity than one whose whole thought is to eat and drink for tomorrow he dies.<sup>62</sup>

Nor was Codrington prepared to deny the existence of morality and ethics in primitive culture merely because these qualities could not be directly tied to a religious belief system. "Scientific" people, he wrote in 1875, might deny moral feelings to savages. If that is the case, then the Melanesians of Codrington's acquaintance did not qualify as savages. "It is quite enough for my purpose if lying, stealing, etc. are called bad and truth, obedience to parents and kindness to the sick are called good."<sup>63</sup>

#### Missionary Empiricism

The level of empathy between the developing science of anthropology and the Melanesian Mission, therefore, can be measured in part by the

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<sup>62</sup>Ibid., p. 313.

<sup>63</sup>Robert Codrington in The Island Voyage, 1875, p. 27.



degree to which anthropological theory supported intellectual assumptions. But members of the Mission also occasionally parted company with even those anthropologists they found sympathetic on strictly empirical grounds. The missionaries occupied a position as long-term observers of an alien culture in the field that no anthropologists began to approach until well into the twentieth century. The concept of intensive study of limited areas developed slowly. Even after field expeditions like the Torres Strait Expedition and the Percy Slade Expedition became part of the methodology of anthropology, residence in a particular area tended to be short-term, and much of the work was of the survey variety. Rivers, for example, did much of his important work on kinship by interviewing informants on the deck of the Southern Cross as the ship made its circuit of mission stations. Even Malinowski, who is often regarded as the individual most responsible for moving anthropological investigation from the mission ship and the verandah and into the village proper dealt in field studies measured in months rather than years.<sup>64</sup>

For the long-term resident missionary, however sympathetic and cooperative, the theories and observations of transient anthropologists were to be taken with a grain of salt. This was particularly so as an important element of the Mission's own mythology centered on the supposed inability of any outsider to "know" the Melanesian completely. "I must emphatically state my belief," wrote John Steward, the fifth

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<sup>64</sup>George W. Stocking, "The Ethnographer's Magic" in Observers Observed: Essays on Ethnographic Fieldwork, ed. George W. Stocking (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983), pp. 81-93.

bishop of Melanesia who spent nearly thirty years in the field (1902-1928), "that no European can ever hope to fully understand the mind of the Melanesian . . . . No amount of trying to live like one of themselves will have the desired effect, countless generations moulded in an utterly different pattern of life lie between us . . . . the most we can do is to try to get a little nearer to them by endless sympathy and patience."<sup>65</sup>

Still, the missionary, by virtue of long residence and that very patience and sympathy, enjoyed the advantage of "overhearing" much that would not be told to an outsider. Steward knew Malinowski's work on Melanesian cultures and particularly appreciated the anthropologist's assessment of the cultural function of family and kinship bonds. But he confessed to being extremely puzzled by what he encountered in Malinowski's descriptions of the sexual mores of Melanesians. "His book paints a picture," Steward commented, "that is utterly unlike anything that I know about the Melanesians with whom I lived."<sup>66</sup> Either Malinowski had found a unique group of Melanesians, which would be the equivalent of taking the Basques as representatives of European culture, or else he had had his leg "well and truly pulled." For Steward could conceive of ". . . no native people who would dream of discussing things of that sort with a foreigner of another race or colour. I may be wrong and Malinowski may be right, but I don't think so."<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> John Steward, John Steward's Memoirs, ed. M. R. Newbolt (Chester: Phillipson and Bolder, 1939), p. 126.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

For Robert Codrington, some thirty years earlier, the issue was even clearer. While he shared the inclusive view of primitive culture posited by scholars like Tylor, he objected on empirical grounds to some of their theoretical constructs. Codrington himself remained extremely hesitant regarding definitive conclusions about the beliefs and practices of Melanesians, principally because of the difficulty of obtaining an accurate impression of what was taking place. Given the number of islands in question and the diversity of the languages involved, any information garnered had a problematic quality.<sup>68</sup> In the specific case of religious inquiry, he recognized the limitations of the young who often served as the missionary ethnographer's informants. Quite often they neither knew nor understood very much of traditional belief and practice. Converts, moreover, tended to themselves take a dim view of the old ways. The missionary observer himself seldom had the time or, in many cases, the inclination to make systematic inquiries. Even when this was not the case, he found they often drew conclusions too quickly and then spent years trying to make their "facts" fit their early, premature conceptions. And most significantly, almost all observers of primitive culture on the scene had difficulty separating what they actually saw from their preconceived notions. "It is extremely difficult," he thought, "for anyone to begin enquiries without some prepossessions, which, even if he can communicate with natives in their own language, affect his conception of the meaning

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<sup>68</sup>Codrington, "Religious Beliefs and Practices," p. 261.

of the answer he receives. The questions he puts guide the native to the answer he thinks he ought to give."<sup>69</sup>

This being the state of things, Codrington remained skeptical of the intellectual pigeon-holing of what were for him the very real and varied practices of people with names and faces. In some instances he tactfully, but emphatically, pointed out to his armchair colleagues the problems of misleading generalizations. In thanking a Dr. Garland of Strasburg for the gift of his book on the anthropology of the South Seas, he questioned the author's use of "Malay" to designate everyone from Madagascar to Hawaii; a practice Codrington compared to a Chinese scholar calling all western Europeans Franks.<sup>70</sup> A far more complex issue involved his own investigation of mana and its relationship to contemporary theories of the origin of religion.

Along with civilization, the social question of perhaps the most critical importance for Victorian anthropologists concerned the origin and development of religion. The concerns detailed in the previous chapter which emerged in the wake of the erosion of biblical truth were inevitably reflected in the new science of man. Two thirds of Sir John Lubbock's Origins of Civilization (1871), for example, dealt with either religion or marriage.<sup>71</sup> Myth and religion formed the basis for much of the work of Max Mueller and Edward Tylor as well.

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<sup>69</sup>Robert Codrington, The Melanesians: Studies in their Anthropology and Folklore (New York: Dover Publications, 1972. First published 1891), p. 118.

<sup>70</sup>Codrington Papers, letter to Dr. Garland, Dec. 31, 1864.

<sup>71</sup>Stocking, Victorian Anthropology, p. 185.

As might be expected, too, once Christianity had been removed from the sphere of the sacred and the unquestionable, the study of religion as a whole shifted from a simple division of the true and the false to the comparative and the developmental. The methodology applied to religion, in short, paralleled that utilized in the study of other human institutions. By far the most prominent theoretical constructs were developmental. Edward Tylor, for example, saw religion as evolving ". . . upwards from the simplest theory which attributes life and personality to animal, vegetable and mineral alike . . . up to that which sees in each department of the world the protecting and fostering care of an appropriate divinity, and at last of one Supreme Being ordering and controlling the lower hierarchy."<sup>72</sup> The human religious experience, in other words, could be marshalled into a fairly tidy order, beginning with the attribution of vitality to all natural phenomena--the process Tylor called animism--proceeding through polytheism and ending in the rationalization that produced the concept of monotheism.<sup>73</sup>

Although Tylor had utilized data supplied by Codrington for formulating his construct, and Codrington himself had attended Tylor's lectures on his return to England, the missionary-ethnographer did not agree with it. The source of this disagreement was of a partially theological nature. If any single principle could be said to account

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<sup>72</sup>Edward Tylor, "The Religion of Savages," Fortnightly Review, 1866, quoted in Stocking, Victorian Anthropology, p. 192.

<sup>73</sup>S. G. F. Brandon, "Origins of Religion," Dictionary of the History of Ideas, ed. Philip P. Einer (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1974) 4:94-95.

for the goals and methods articulated by the Melanesian Mission, the best choice would be the belief in the universality and fundamental uniformity of human religious response; a belief deeply rooted in particular High Church traditions and reinforced by the Liberal Anglican response to the intellectual crises of the nineteenth century. It is important to realize, moreover, that this inclusive, universalist emphasis did not form part of the general consciousness of Victorian missionaries or even of missionary-ethnographers. Lorimer Fison, a Methodist missionary-ethnographer in Fiji who had first brought Codrington and Tylor into direct contact, found no difficulty adhering to a strictly evolutionary view of social development. However intrinsically interesting Fijian customs might be or whatever insights they might provide, Fison still looked forward to a time in the not too distant future when the progressive Anglo-Saxon would replace the violent and unproductive Fijian.<sup>74</sup>

But Codrington's disagreement with Tylor's scheme had an empirical as well as a theological basis. His own observations of Melanesian religious belief and practice led to the first authoritative expression of the concept of mana. As Codrington saw it, the Melanesian mind was entirely possessed by its belief in a supernatural power or influence affecting everything beyond the ordinary power of men or the common processes of nature. This power known throughout Melanesia as mana, was not fixed in anything and could be conveyed to almost

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<sup>74</sup>George W. Stocking, "Two Styles of Missionary Anthropology." Unpublished article, 1980, p. 6.

anything. Mana itself had a purely impersonal nature although it could only be made manifest through some person or spirit that directed it. Thus all Melanesian religious practice centered on acquiring mana and using it for one's own benefit.<sup>75</sup>

These observations undoubtedly did serve to reinforce Codrington's belief in the universal human capacity to comprehend the Infinite. The accuracy of his conclusions, moreover, has been questioned. Ernst Cassirer has suggested that Codrington erred in designating mana a spiritual as well as a magical power. In Cassirer's view, mana must be regarded as a very generalized, undifferentiated concept; so undifferentiated, in fact, that it cannot properly be treated as either a noun or a verb. Codrington, in short, may have confused the Indefinite with the Infinite.<sup>76</sup> But the important consideration here is not that Codrington may have reached incorrect conclusions or that his data confirmed his theological proclivities. It is, rather, in the fact that his scholarly contemporaries valued his contribution as a respectable endeavor subject to the same scholarly criteria as that of anyone else in the field. No one dismissed his evaluation of mana as a mere configuration of his clerical status. A review of The Melanesians (1891) published in Internationales Archiv fur Ethnographic praised Codrington as ". . . a keen observer, cautious in drawing inferences, free from any kind of dogmatism and, what is most important, kind in his feelings towards fellowmen in a backward

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<sup>75</sup>Codrington, The Melanesians, pp. 118-19.

<sup>76</sup>Cassirer, Language and Myth, pp. 66-80.

state of civilization commonly and vulgarly called savages."<sup>77</sup> R. R. Marett, Tylor's younger Oxford colleague, used Codrington's concepts as an important part of his own view of the existence of "pre-animistic" religion.<sup>78</sup> "The question," Marett maintained, "is whether . . . a rudimentary religion can exist. It will suffice to prove that supernaturalism, the attitude of the mind dictated by awe of the mysterious, which provides religion with its raw material, may exist apart from animism, and further, may provide a basis on which animistic doctrine is subsequently constructed."<sup>79</sup>

Codrington, then, had credibility as an independent theorist as well as a reliable collector of data. Moreover, the Mission's perspective on the study of Melanesian language and culture--a perspective created largely by Bishop Patterson and Codrington--was gradually incorporated into the methodology of anthropological fieldwork. Malinowski is often cited as the first practitioner of the intensive method that would become the standard in fieldwork. But George Stocking has suggested that the prototype for the essentials of the intensive method (long residence, linguistic expertise and first-hand observation) can be found among the best of the missionary ethnographers. Their methods, in turn, were absorbed by the pioneers of fieldwork to a considerable extent.

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<sup>77</sup>Codrington Collection, Series A, review from Internationales Archiv fur Ethnographic, 1892, p. 98.

<sup>78</sup>Stocking, Victorian Anthropology, p. 319.

<sup>79</sup>R. R. Marett, The Threshold of Religion, 1914, quoted in Brandon, "Origins of Religion," Dictionary of the History of Ideas, 3, p. 95.



W. H. R. Rivers, whose influence on the development of British anthropology quite possibly exceeded that of anyone else in the years before his death in 1922, began his own fieldwork by confining himself to survey work based on data provided by informants. Through his elaboration of the method for ferreting out intricate kinship/genealogical arrangements, he indeed made a major contribution to the scientific approach to ethnological observation. Using his methods, Rivers thought, the trained scientific observer could collect pertinent information in a comparatively short time that had escaped even long-term residents. They had, in other words, the means of getting at the basic structure of any indigenous society under study. But gradually, Rivers demonstrated an awareness of the need for intensive study and long-term residence. The advantage of this approach lay in the addition of the empathetic, detailed, and penetrating knowledge that characterized the work of selective missionary ethnographers. His own work revealed a growing sensitivity to the difficulties of cultural translation--however effective the methodological models the investigator employed--and the necessity of the intensive method in overcoming them.

In 1907, when the British Association for the Advancement of Science established a committee to revise Notes and Queries, its 1881 publication designed to improve the quality of anthropological data gathered by missionaries, government officials and other amateur observers, Rivers's input established the tone of this most influential work. He emphasized the critical need to acquire the indigenous language as the only key to a proper understanding of the life and

thought of a society. The greatest caution, he urged, must be used in posing direct questions since the questions themselves would suggest "civilized" categories with little or no meaning for the informant. And finally, the investigator must exhibit tact and sympathy.<sup>80</sup>

The sources for this very important shift in attitude in a highly influential figure were varied. In addition to the impact made by his own field experience, Rivers had become increasingly involved in the study of the approach to any given problem tended to be somewhat broader than usual for a British scientist trained in a heavily positivist and empirical tradition.<sup>81</sup> But it does not seem unreasonable to suggest that Rivers, and through him British field anthropology, may have also been influenced by the peculiar expertise of the missionaries he encountered in the field and with whom he collaborated closely. Those missionaries (Durrad, Fox, Ferrall and Hopkins), however appreciative they might be of Rivers's science, were first and foremost the heirs and perpetuators of a mission philosophy that had come from the time of Bishop Patteson granted indigenous culture its own worth and validity and, perhaps even more significantly, its own complexity.

The basis of the Mission's easy, almost symbiotic, relationship with anthropology, to return to the original question, appears to have been the intellectual flexibility of at least some educated, enquiring Victorians; a flexibility based on common reference points in

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<sup>80</sup>Stocking, "The Ethnographer's Magic," pp. 87-91.

<sup>81</sup>Solobin, W.H.R. Rivers, pp. 214-20.

educational background, shared ethical concerns and a less rigid view of the division between amateur and professional in intellectual life than is presently the case. Nor should the role of the particular personalities involved be overlooked. The concept of a chasm between religion and science--including the science of man--may have had some relevance for more rigid minds at either end of the intellectual spectrum. But for Codrington and Patteson, or for that matter, Tylor and Mueller, the issue remained more a matter of dialogue than denial. Thomas Huxley, on receiving an inquiry from his small grandson as to whether Huxley himself had ever seen a water baby, replied, "My friend who wrote the story of the water baby (Charles Kingsley) was a very kind man and very clever. Perhaps he thought I could see as much in the water as he did--there are some people who see a great deal and some who see very little in the same things."<sup>82</sup> It is well to keep in mind that for the most part Victorian intellectuals looked at the same things and were willing to concede that a different vision could be entertained by individuals who nevertheless remained both "very kind and very clever."

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<sup>82</sup>Thomas Huxley, Life and Letters of Thomas Huxley, 2, quoted in William Irvine, Apes, Angels and Victorians (New York: Times Special Editions, 1963), p. 415.