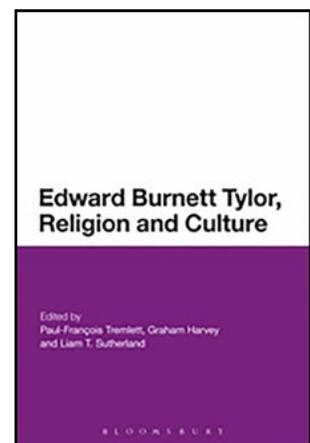


## Rehabilitating E. B. Tylor<sup>1</sup>

James G. Matlock

Parapsychology Foundation

A Review of *Edward Burnett Tylor, Religion and Culture*, edited by Paul-François Tremlett, Liam T. Sutherland, and Graham Harvey. Bloomsbury Academic, 2019. Pp. viii + 219 (paperback) \$39.95. ISBN-10: 135010597X



Sir Edward Burnett Tylor is widely regarded as the father of anthropology, but his contributions to parapsychology are less well known. He was born into a Quaker family in Camberwell, Surrey, on October 2, 1832, and educated at a Quaker school. Denied entrance to a university because of his faith, he worked for a few years in his family's brass foundry, but when he developed symptoms of tuberculosis, was sent to recuperate in warmer climes. In Cuba he met a fellow Quaker, archaeologist Henry Christy, who invited him to accompany him to Mexico to explore Toltec ruins there. This experience was a pivotal one for Tylor. It furnished the subject of his first book, a travelogue entitled *Anahuac: or Mexico and the Mexicans, Ancient and Modern* (1861), and inspired him to undertake a comprehensive review of everything that had been written about indigenous cultures around the world by archaeologists, missionaries, travelers, and colonial administrators. This led to *Researches into the Early History of Mankind and the Development of Civilization* (1865) and his best-known work, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom*, whose first edition appeared in 1871. *Anthropology: An Introduction to the Study of Man and Civilization* followed in 1881.

Tylor is generally considered an armchair anthropologist, but as Miguel Astor-Aguilera explains in the volume under review, in addition to his time in Mexico, he conducted ethnographic fieldwork with the Ojibwa around Lake Huron, Canada, and in the southwestern American pueblos, particularly the Zuni. He spent some time studying deaf and dumb persons in institutions in London and Berlin and sat with mediums in London.

Tylor married Anna Fox in 1858, but the couple never had children. He was made a fellow of the Royal Society in 1871. Ironically, having failed to admit him as a student, Oxford awarded him a Doctor of Civil Law degree in 1875 and appointed him Keeper of the University Museum in 1883. He held the position of Reader in Anthropology from 1884 to 1895 and in 1896 became the first incumbent of a

<sup>1</sup> Address correspondence to: James G. Matlock, Ph.D., 4 Booneville Cemetery Road, Fayetteville, TN, 37334, USA, [jgmatlock@yahoo.com](mailto:jgmatlock@yahoo.com)

Chair in Anthropology at Oxford, retiring as Emeritus Professor in 1909. Tylor gave the first series of Gifford Lectures, on *The Natural History of Religion*, at the University of Aberdeen between 1889 and 1891. He was knighted in 1912 and died on January 2, 1917, in Wellington, Somerset.

The book under review is the paperback edition of a book first published in 2017 by Bloomsbury Academic. It is a collection of ten essays treating various aspects of Tylor's life and work, representing an attempt to correct misimpressions about him and to demonstrate his contemporary relevance. Tylor is not much read today, principally because, under the influence of Lyell and Darwin, he propounded an evolutionary theory of cultural development that anthropology has since rejected. He placed particular emphasis on religion, the most primitive form of which he thought was the belief in "Spiritual Beings." Several chapters deal with Tylor's concept of "animism," as he called this proposed earliest form of religion. In the first chapter, James L. Cox considers the debate between Tylor and his student Andrew Lang over Lang's contention that a "primitive monotheism" was more fundamental than a belief in spirit beings, the latter including the spirits of deceased humans and nature spirits, as well as deity figures. Aspects of animism are treated also by Graham Harvey in the second chapter and Jonathan Jon in the third chapter. In the fifth chapter, Liam T. Sutherland considers Tylor's conception of religion more broadly.

Other authors deal with other aspects of Tylor's writings and activities. Robert A. Segal and Martin D. Stringer treat Tylor's idea of myth as a forerunner of scientific thinking, Anne Kalvig his study of London mediums, including D. D. Home and W. Stainton Moses. Astor-Aguilera examines Tylor as an ethnographer, and Katy Soar his grounding in archaeology. Paul-François Tremlett closes the volume with a look at one of Tylor's key theoretical constructs, the "survival," a belief or practice that has persisted despite the loss of its original rationale. Tylor was interested in Victorian Spiritualism partly because he regarded it as a "survival and revival" of animistic practices (Stocking, 1971).

Together these ten papers provide a well-rounded look at Tylor, from various disciplinary perspectives, and achieve the editors' aim of rehabilitating Tylor in the context of contemporary academic interests. There is something important missing, however, and that is the parapsychological perspective. Perhaps because I entered anthropology with a background in parapsychology, Tylor's emphasis on observation and experience as the source of spirit beliefs jumped out at me on my first reading of *Primitive Culture* (Tylor, 1956a, 1956b). The contributors to *Edward Burnett Tylor, Religion and Culture* refer again and again to Tylor's concern with religious "beliefs" and repeat the abiding canard that his perspective was overly "intellectual." Several contributors acknowledge that Tylor held that spirit beliefs derive from "dreams and visions," but they seem to think that he was arguing that these dreams and visions led to spirit beliefs through a process of ratiocination, pure and simple. That is not what Tylor seems to have meant, though.

Although at various points in *Primitive Culture* he points to "dreams and visions" as the basis of belief in spirits—and life after death—Tylor used this phrasing as a shorthand reference to a range of experiences, including especially what have come to be called near-death experiences and apparitions. He cites example after example of these, some veridical. There are also out-of-body experiences, some with reciprocal apparitions, and poltergeist phenomena in association with deceased agents. When he refers to dreams, it is shared dreams, dreams that include out-of-body perceptions, or dreams of interactions with the spirits of deceased loved ones.

Tylor (1871, 1956b) proposed that nature spirits and deities in animistic cultures were generalizations from human spirits perceived in the various dreams and visions he compiled, then sought to trace the development of thought about spirit beings into the religious conceptions of the more complex societies of the Victorian era. Philosophical elaborations enter into Tylor's portrayal of the development of religion, but religion in his view began with experiences that during his lifetime became the subject matter of psychical research. Tylor was skeptical of these experiences as evidence for postmortem survival, but he nevertheless understood how they might have suggested survival to those who experienced them. When he attributed the origin of spirit beliefs to "dreams and visions," therefore, he was asserting that the beliefs had an empirical basis, even though (in modern skeptical fashion) he did not personally believe that conclusion to be justified.

*Primitive Culture* not only provides a wealth of testimony about spontaneous psychic experiences suggestive of postmortem survival, it was the first book to draw attention to the widespread appearance of reincarnation beliefs in indigenous cultures. Here again Tylor pointed to observations and experiences—a mother's announcing dreams, a baby's birthmarks or physical resemblance to a deceased forbearer, a toddler's behaviors reminiscent of that person—as grounds for the belief.

I have no doubt that Tylor was right that it was such experiences and observations that inspired beliefs in postmortem survival, the ability of the deceased to interact with the living, and reincarnation. Similar phenomena continue to be reported and often produce similar convictions among those who experience them today. Tylor appears never to have joined the Society for Psychical Research (formed in 1882), unlike Andrew Lang, who became a prominent member. Among other things, Lang wrote *Cock Lane and Common-Sense* (Lang, 1894), which dealt with haunted houses, poltergeists, apparitions, second sight, and other psychic phenomena in Victorian Britain, comparing them to similar phenomena reported from indigenous societies around the world. It was Tylor who set Lang on the path to psychical research, but his role in this connection has been little appreciated in parapsychology, anthropology, or religious studies. I was disappointed to find that none of the contributors to *Edward Burnett Tylor, Religion and Culture* considered it. The rehabilitation of Tylor will not be complete until that is done.

## References

- Lang, A. (1896). *Cock Lane and common-sense*. Longmans, Green and Co.
- Stocking, G. W. (1971). Animism in theory and practice: E. B. Tylor's unpublished 'Notes on spiritualism.' *Man*, 6, 88–104. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2798430>
- Tylor, E. B. (1861). *Anahuac: or Mexico and the Mexicans, ancient and modern.*: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts.
- Tylor, E. B. (1865). *Researches into the early history of mankind and the development of civilization*. John Murray.
- Tylor, E. B. (1871). *Primitive culture: Researches into the development of mythology, philosophy, religion, art, and custom*. John Murray.
- Tylor, E. B. (1881). *Anthropology: An introduction to the study of man and civilization*. Macmillan.
- Tylor, E. B. (1956a). *The origins of culture* (Part I of *Primitive Culture*). Harper & Row.
- Tylor, E. B. (1956b). *Religion in primitive culture* (Part II of *Primitive Culture*). Harper & Row.