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ANDREW LANG: A WORLD WE HAVE LOST¹

William Donaldson

The growth of Scottish literary studies during the past century or so has led to many gains in understanding, but also to a certain amount of loss. The canon has been constructed—some would say narrowed—in ways which have led to the virtual exclusion of towering figures like Robert Chambers and Andrew Lang, whom a visiting Martian scholar would certainly identify as fixed points of reference in the cultural history of the past two hundred years. Lang made his reputation in the south, and that may be part of the problem: after he died the English ignored him because he was a Scot, and the Scots ignored him because he lived and worked mainly in England. The neglect of Lang in particular is brought strongly to mind by the recent publication of Edinburgh University Press’s two-volume edition of *The Selected Writings of Andrew Lang*, reminding us that here is a literary career of great significance, well worthy of re-evaluation.

Andrew Lang was born in Selkirk in 1844, and educated at St. Andrews and Glasgow Universities before going to Balliol on a Snell exhibition. He was one of a brilliant generation of Scottish students of “primitive” societies, which included J. F. McLennan, the author of *Primitive Marriage* (1865); William Robertson Smith, editor of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and author of *Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia* (1885); and James G. Frazer, whose *Golden Bough* (1890-1915) went on to

¹ Andrew Teverson, Alexandra Warwick and Leigh Wilson, eds., *The Edinburgh Critical Edition of the Selected Writings of Andrew Lang, vol. 1: Anthropology: Fairy tale, Folklore, the Origins of Religion, Psychical Research* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015). Pp. 452. Hardback, £150, \$250. ISBN 9781474400213; *The Edinburgh Critical Edition of the Selected Writings of Andrew Lang, vol. 2: Literary Criticism, History, Biography* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015). Pp. 415. Hardback, £150, \$250. ISBN 9781474400237. Two volume set: Hardback, £275, \$440. ISBN 009781474400251. Distributed in the U.S. by Oxford University Press.

become the bible of literary Modernism. Lang became a Fellow of Merton College, Oxford, but after 1875 made his living wholly by the pen.²

Lang had a hugely prolific and successful intellectual career, winning eminence in several fields. Some thought him the finest exponent of English prose in his generation, and his clever, beautifully-written articles enjoyed a wide readership in the leading periodicals of the day. As a reviewer, too, he was tireless.

It was as a poet, however, that Lang first caught the public eye. He was at the forefront the revival of old French forms in English, the ballade, rondeau, triolet, and villanelle, publishing *Ballads and Lyrics of Old France* (1872) including translations of Villon, Ronsard, and Du Bellay with original lyrics of his own. *XXXII Ballades in Blue China* (1881) and *Grass of Parnassus* (1888), were to follow, further developing his characteristic languorous and elegiac manner; but the disappointing reception of his most ambitious poem, *Helen of Troy* (1882), induced him to turn to other fields.

Intellectually, his major contribution lay in the related disciplines of anthropology and folklore. Darwin's theories, Boucher de Perthes's discovery of the relics of Paleolithic man, and exciting new developments in the study of mythology by Max Müller and others prompted a dramatic rise of interest in early societies and the deep prehistoric past. Lang was a child of the Scottish Borders, steeped in ghost and fairy lore, fascinated by the folk inheritance of the past. His reading at his various universities extended far beyond the official curriculum. At St. Andrews he had explored the university's old *grimoires* (remarking that none of them worked) and he was fully abreast of the new methods of analysis which J. F. McLennan and E. B. Tylor were bringing to the study of anthropology and comparative religion. These rested on the theories of stadial development forged during the Scottish Enlightenment—the notion that all human societies pass through a fixed sequence of developmental stages from hunter-gathering to the modern commercial milieu. The new anthropology was founded on a similar progression from savagery to civilisation, but held that the break between the different stages was never

² The best general guide to Lang's life and works remains Roger Lancelyn Green, *Andrew Lang, A Critical Biography with a Short-Title Bibliography of the Works* (Leicester: Edmund Ward, 1946); for Lang as an anthropologist, see Antonius Petrus Leonardus de Cocq, *Andrew Lang, a Nineteenth Century Anthropologist* (Tilburg: Uitg. Swijzen, 1968); there is a good deal of miscellaneous information in *Concerning Andrew Lang, Being the Andrew Lang Lectures delivered before the University of St. Andrews 1927-1937*, with an Introduction by A. Blyth Webster and a Preface by J.B. Salmond (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949); Lang's own works, which remain immensely readable, are the best source of all.

clean: extensive elements of savage culture persisted in more developed societies as “survivals”, frequently in disguised form, and these could be elucidated by appeal to actual practice in contemporary societies still at an earlier stage of development. Thus, one could illuminate early Hellenic Greece by reference the beliefs and practices of modern Iroquois and Maori societies.

Lang was an original thinker with a powerful oppositional streak, who seldom left any idea exactly as he found it. In the area of mythology he challenged the reigning interpretation of Professor Max Müller and others which traced the rise of mythic personages to the intensely figurative terms used by early peoples to describe the forces of nature. The names of the gods were the key to the system because it was from these that the familiar personal gods and goddesses of Western mythology had been derived. In a series of papers collected as *Custom and Myth* (1884), Lang argued that Müller’s approach was fatally flawed. Tales of the gods appeared in similar versions in many different cultures; but the names of the protagonists showed little stability. In addition the focus upon a dominant “Aryan” strand of cultural transmission originating in ancient India was fatally narrow: modern anthropology showed the same practices, customs, and beliefs occurring in widely scattered societies of many different ethnic backgrounds without any obvious prior contact, so that current Diffusionist beliefs were clearly untenable.

The key to mythological systems, said Lang, lay in the doctrine of “survivals”. All societies had passed through a state of savagery, and all modern societies retained cultural traces of this phase, varying with social class and education. Only in the intellectual élite did cultural change take place in a rapid or thorough way; the great body of the people in any society, carried a deal of baggage with them from the past, largely unconsciously, and some of it was very ancient.

Lang’s most important work in this field, *Myth, Ritual and Religion* was published in two volumes in 1887. In it he gathered evidence from throughout the world that all “primitive” peoples have similar ideas, tales, customs, and beliefs, and that “survivals” of these live on in classical mythology and in the folk traditions of the developed world. Lang treated the savage intellect with respect, unlike some of his contemporaries. Considered in its own terms, its power and resourcefulness constituted a kind of “savage metaphysics”. He regarded it as the source of the disturbingly irrational quality often encountered in classical mythology; it had all descended from an older world in which it had once made perfect sense. The gods had evolved from earlier totemic animal forms to the radiant creatures of later mythology without quite shedding the earlier accretions.

The implications were dramatic and reverberated in a number of fields. If he was right, then the conventional view of folk tales, for example, could not be correct. This had descended from Sir Walter Scott and the Brothers Grimm, and held that folk tales were the detritus of lofty mythic systems, remnants of a once high culture which had fallen into the clutches of the common people and become degraded during a long process of disintegrative oral transmission. Lang argued that the tales contained the genuinely archaic material upon which epics and romances had later been reared, and willingly accepted the consequence that the common people must, therefore, be a crucial element in the creation and transmission of culture.

The influence of E. B. Tylor, author of *Primitive Culture*, and one of the giants of Victorian science, was evident in Lang's earlier work, but during the 1890s he parted company with Tylor regarding the primacy of "animism". Tylor held that religion had its roots in "primitive" belief systems which taught that the whole material world was infused by spirit life which caused it to move and be. In *The Making of Religion* (1898) and *Magic and Religion* (1901), Lang argued for traces of monotheism in a number of early societies, pre-dating the later and cruder ideas of animism. The point was a crucial one. If he was right, then the dominant view in evolutionary anthropology, which saw a smooth and inevitable ascent of human civilization from "lower" to "higher" forms, was wrong. Cultural evolution might not be inherently progressive.

Although personally fastidious and retiring, Lang was active in a number of contemporary learned societies. He was a member of the Anthropological Society, and in 1878 he became a founding member of the Folk-Lore Society. He chaired its folk-tale section, and later became its president. The traditional legends, customs, and beliefs preserved in the lower social strata of developed societies formed the conventional focus, but Lang urged a wider view. He argued that the cultural forms identified as "folkloristic" were not historically late independent creations but survivals from much earlier stages of social evolution, and that they ought to be elucidated, therefore, by the familiar methods of comparative anthropology. In consequence he had little patience with the tendency to narrow the range of the discipline by restricting its field of enquiry to unlettered peasant peoples living in sequestered rural spots, insisting that culturally archaic material survived in ritual, ceremonial, and religious traditions at every social level, including among the educated classes. Similar complaints were directed against the Anthropological Society which was, said Lang, obsessed with "primitive" cultures, and refused to consider the abundant evidence of the survival of savage beliefs and practices in more developed societies. The Society for Psychical Research--which he had joined shortly after its formation in 1882

(becoming its chairman in 1911)—was likewise focused on contemporary phenomena and turned a deaf ear to the enormous testimony of the past. In books like *Cock Lane and Common Sense* (1894) he showed that there were “primitive” phenomena like hauntings, wraiths, ghosts, clairvoyance, telepathy, and telekinesis manifestly present in the modern world and attested by every social class, exactly as there had been from the earliest periods in every society which had left a record. Lang refused to speculate about the truth of these phenomena, but insisted that whether real or hallucinatory, their occurrence was a historical fact, and widespread and well-documented fact to boot. The evidence clamoured for linked anthropological, folkloristic and scientific research, but the appropriate disciplines obstinately refused to take it up.

Lang’s virtuosity sought boundless outlet, and works of apparently effortless expertise flowed from his pen in a wide range of academic disciplines. He would be remembered as a classicist, for example, if he had written nothing else. His important translations of the *Odyssey* (1879, with S. H. Butcher) and the *Iliad* (1883, with Walter Leaf and Ernest Myers) were followed by three monographs on the Homeric question: *Homer and the Epic* (1893), *Homer and his Age* (1906), and *The World of Homer* (1910), which argued with passionate eloquence against the “separatist” tradition of Thomas Blackwell, Friedrich August Wolf and Karl Lachmann, whose thesis was that the Homeric epics were orally composed, and sustained for generations by oral transmission by numerous creatively active singers before being committed to writing in sixth century Athens, centuries after Homer’s death. Appealing once again to the comparative method, Lang invoked other poems of epic length produced in heroic societies at a similar stage of development, like the Finnish *Kalevala* and the old French *chansons de geste*, contrasting their typically loose and episodic arrangement with the *Iliad’s* more highly organised structure to insist that the latter must be the work of a single, brilliantly creative personality. The problem of transmission across the centuries between composition and final editing was surmounted by appealing to the latest archaeological findings which suggested that the introduction of writing in ancient Greece may have been considerably earlier than supposed, and so the coherence of the Homeric *oeuvre* could be based upon direct textual transmission.

In the 1890s Lang turned to a new area—Scottish history, challenging the Whiggish and Presbyterian perspectives which had dominated the field since the days of the Treaty of Union in 1707. He posed a single crucial question: was it possible to defend the Stuarts? The answer, it appeared, was “yes,” and books like *The Mystery of Mary Stuart* (1901), *John Knox and the Reformation* (1905), and a general *History of Scotland from the Roman Occupation to the Suppression of the Last Jacobite Rising* (4 vols.,

1900-07) which eventually ran to five editions, flowed swiftly from his pen. In *Pickle the Spy, or, The Incognito of Prince Charles* (1897) he made a major contribution to Jacobite historiography. Lang had been helping his friend Robert Louis Stevenson, then working on a Jacobite tale in Samoa, by sending out transcripts of papers from the British Museum. When these came back following Stevenson's death, Lang used them as the basis of a striking historical work. The Jacobite story had been gilded by a halo of incorruptible Highland loyalty and heroism as it came down through the nineteenth century. Lang proceeded to dispel it, building a powerful case against Alastair Macdonell, thirteenth chief of Glengarry and close associate of Prince Charles Edward Stuart, as a traitor and paid government spy. That one of the great highland chiefs could behave like this gave serious pause to earnest Victorian readers; but the real interest of the book lies in its detailed account of Charles Edward Stuart's career after the Rising in 1745/6, the years of wandering around Europe, often in disguise, and seldom—thanks to people like young Alastair of Glengarry—more than one jump ahead of the British secret service, and the later decline into alcoholism and irrelevance about which rather little was then known. *Pickle the Spy* also illustrates how Lang set about such tasks and how he was able to maintain his staggering productivity. He employed teams of fact-checkers and research assistants, built an extensive web of correspondents with specialist knowledge in each of his several fields, and enjoyed privileged access, thanks to his social standing, to extensive collections of historical papers still in private hands.

And while all this was going on, Lang continued as a prolific and brilliant essayist, with regular contributions to a wide range of contemporary journals including the *Daily News*, the *Saturday Review*, the *Morning Post*, the *Athenaeum* and *Spectator*. There was also his column "At the Sign of the Ship" in the monthly *Longman's Magazine*, which was largely responsible for establishing the *causerie* as a contemporary genre. The collected essays in *Books and Bookmen* (1886) and *Adventures among Books* (1905) contain a great deal of lively and irreverent social commentary and show that Lang was an outstanding humourist. As the leading practitioner of the essay as a form in the early years of the twentieth century, he was a significant forerunner of Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Townsend Warner, P. G. Wodehouse and the New York wits of the Algonquin Round Table.

Then there were the biographies, *The Life and Letters of John Gibson Lockhart* (2 vols., 1897) and *Jeanne d'Arc (The Maid of France)*, (1908), and on top of this Lang's own novels and short stories, *The Monk of Fife* (1896), *The Disentanglers* (1902) and *The World's Desire* (1890), the latter written in collaboration with his friend Henry Rider Haggard.

And if this were not enough, he made a major contribution to children's literature in the form of his "coloured" fairy books, compiled with his wife Leonora Blanche Alleyne. These contained folk-tales from many parts of the world, and there were twelve in all, beginning with *The Blue Fairy Book* (1889), and continuing through Red, Green, Yellow, Pink, Grey, Violet, Crimson, Brown, Orange, and Olive, to *The Lilac Fairy Book* in 1910.

Lang was an acknowledged expert on balladry as well. As early as the mid eighteen-seventies he had been considered a sufficient authority to write the article "Ballad" for the 9th edition of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. In it he advanced a theory that some of the ballads possessing refrain lines must have been composed collectively to the accompaniment of dancing in the round, a practice he maintained could still be found in certain parts of the Mediterranean world. Here again he attacked established orthodoxy in the field, namely the trickle-down theory descending from Bishop Thomas Percy and Sir Walter Scott which held that the ballads were the remnants of a once lofty aristocratic minstrel culture which had passed into the keeping of the common people and then slowly degenerated down the centuries through a fatal mixture of forgetting, mislearning, and crude aesthetic judgment. Lang argued, on the contrary, that the ballads were genuine products of the popular imagination, the result of communal composition.

His position changed down the years as fresh evidence became available from contemporary field-collecting in Britain and America, but he insisted on communality as the defining principle. At first he had envisaged spontaneous synchronous composition by a dancing group. Later he came to argue that the ballads were communal by virtue of each having received multiple instances of artistic attention by creatively gifted individual transmitters over lengthy periods of time. The key point was that tradition—far from being degenerative, as Percy and Scott had held—was actually a purifying and refining medium. Lang gave particular attention to ballad editing, and the widespread incidence of forgery and imposition. He was especially interested the extent of Scott's personal creative contribution to *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1802-3). The crucial example was "Auld Maitland," the ballad world's "Ossian," a set-piece demonstration of the coherence of tradition (if the ballad could be shown to be genuine); or of the contrary (if not).³ During these years Lang actively corresponded with Francis James Child, then editing his seminal *English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (5 vols. 1882-98).

³ Cf. Gardner B. Taplin, "Andrew Lang as a Student of the Traditional Narrative Ballad," *Tulane Studies in English*, 14 (1965): 57-73.

Lang was still hard at work when he was felled by a heart attack on a fishing trip in July 1912, at the Tor-na-Coille Hotel, Banchory, having just posted a review for the *Manchester Guardian* of the latest part of *The Golden Bough*.

After his death, Lang's reputation suffered a swift decline. There was just too much of him, and he had offended too many people: a veil was hence drawn over one of the most dramatic intellectual enterprises of the last two centuries. There is more than just Lang at stake here: if we are blind to him, then we are blind to some of the most interesting things going on in Scottish cultural history since the Treaty of Union, so the publication of Edinburgh University Press's new edition of selected writings should be an occasion for unrestrained rejoicing.⁴

At first sight the edition has much to recommend it. It presents key passages from Lang's writing in several of his major fields, including anthropology, fairy tales, general folklore and psychical research, along with literary scholarship, history and biography. There are introductory essays, a chronology of Lang's life and major works, appendices of frequently cited names, and explanatory notes and indices. But there are several points with which one might take issue. The publisher claims this is a "critical edition," but it is a simple anthology culled from existing publications, and not a new text compiled from a collation of different sources, as a proper "critical edition" would require. Meantime those interested in Lang's activities as a poet, translator and writer of fiction will look here largely in vain. Still, the results fill two substantial volumes, and though they are priced well beyond the ordinary pocket, one must begin somewhere.

Each volume is furnished with the same general introduction, followed by a second one specific to the volume it prefixes. The editors bring a variety of skills to bear, with specialist interests in post-colonialism and fairy tales, the history and philosophy of science, and general *fin-de-siècle* literature. They commendably unearth and quote from long-buried correspondence, but otherwise there is little here that is new. Above all, it is a pity that they should have chosen to echo some contemporary criticisms that Lang wrote too much and spread himself too thin. Worse still, they frequently talk of Lang as intellectually confused and of adopting paradoxical positions, when the extracts they themselves have chosen

⁴ [Note: remarkably, a second new Lang edition, *The Selected Writings of Andrew Lang*, in three volumes, edited by Tom Hubbard and Celeste Ray, has also been published in the Pickering Masters series (Routledge/Taylor and Francis/Informa, 2017). Though the Pickering edition was not available to be considered in the current essay, we hope to notice it in a future issue. Ed.]

suggest exactly the opposite qualities, exhibiting throughout a brilliant clarity of thought and expression and an almost staggering fecundity of mind.

One would have liked to see a stronger sense that the neglect of Lang after his death might lie in the almost unfailingly contrarian positions he adopted while alive—the originality that led him to oppose comfortable orthodoxies in half a dozen fields, careless about whose reputation got mangled in the process. The editors miss here—and throughout—the ruthless quality of Lang’s mind.

For example, Lang’s vigorous attempts to draw religion itself within the natural order and make it subject to scientific enquiry must have been profoundly unsettling to the conventionally pious. He wrote of the evolutionary theory of the origin of religion:

The theory regards gods as merely ghosts or spirits, raised to a higher, or to the highest power. Mankind, according to the system, was inevitably led, by the action of reason upon apparent facts, to endow all things, from humanity itself to earth, sky, rain, sea, fire, with conscious personality, life, spirit; and these attributes were as gradually withdrawn again, under stress of better knowledge, till only man was left with a soul, and only the universe was left with a God. The last scientific step, then, it may be inferred, is to deprive the universe of a God, and mankind of souls.... If all this be valid, the idea of God is derived from a savage fallacy, though, of course, it does not follow that an idea is erroneous, *because* it was attained by mistaken processes and from false premises.⁵

Lang said of his psychical researches (which he approached in a spirit of thorough scepticism) that if there was only one spark amongst the smoke, then current theories of a wholly materialistic order of nature must be abandoned, thus managing to upset theists and materialists at the same time, an intellectual felony which was not likely to be quickly forgiven.

The editors do not take a wholly negative view of their subject: they frequently comment on Lang’s lucky knack of anticipating major subsequent developments in literary Modernism and interdisciplinary study. It is a pity they did not reflect on whether he might actually have been the *cause* of at least some of these. They seem to consider his significance as largely fortuitous and contextual rather than springing from intrinsic excellence of writing or thought. But they do not always establish a clear and consistent approach; one of the problems of a multi-authored work, perhaps. Criticising Lang’s approach to folklore they say:

The second objection to Lang’s folklore method that arises from critiques of Tylor’s anthropological theory is that, in locating the

⁵ Andrew Lang, *Cock Lane and Common-Sense*, new ed. (London, Longmans, 1896), 336-7, 339

meaning of elements of tradition in a savage past that has been outgrown, Lang effectively argues that these elements of tradition do not have meaning for society in the present (I: 30)

This manages to turn Lang's actual position on its head. Defending the point, they state that most modern folklorists regard their subject as a living one, continuing to exert influence on the present; but it is difficult to see how this differs from Lang's frequently expressed argument that modern "civilised" life was at many points shaped and influenced by unconsciously inherited cultural belief and practices. The weasel words here are "Lang effectively argues"; necessary in this context because this is not what he actually says. The editors do not manage to establish a consistent view: statements made in one place are undermined in another: these remarks about Lang as a folklorist sit rather uncomfortably with later editorial comments that "For Lang's own anthropology in the 1890s and beyond, the relation between evidence from non-modern cultures and evidence from contemporary modernity is of the essence" (I: 40). Elsewhere the editors accuse him of blurring the difference between science and the supernatural (II: 29), when in fact he was advocating the application scientific method to supposedly supernatural phenomena with a view to exploding most if not all of the latter, a different thing entirely.

Lang's literary criticism receives similarly uncertain handling. Sometimes the editors seem to support the verdict of those contemporaries who complained that Lang abused his immense authority in the literary world by not taking criticism seriously enough, failing to distinguish adequately between good and bad, and having a corrupt and vitiated taste which preferred Rider Haggard to Zola and Hardy. They acknowledge that his approach was more complex than critics sometimes allow, yet seem to endorse the view that he preferred a simplistic, child-centred, nostalgic approach to the world, or at least the world of fiction. Yet in one of the main essays cited in support of this notion, reprinted in vol. II of this edition (II: 93-103), we find Lang saying this: "What is good, what is permanent, may be found in fiction of every *genre*, and shall we 'crab' and underrate any *genre* because it chances not to be that which we are best fitted to admire?" (II: 95); and he goes on to lavish praise upon Dostoevsky, adding that he finds him so powerful as a writer as to be simply overwhelming. Elsewhere we find Lang commending Zola for possessing "certain qualities of real value, certain passages of distinction and of beauty in his romances." (II: 136). What Lang complained of was the tendency in "naturalistic" writers towards pseudo-scientific, or social-scientific, theorizing which he thought violated genre boundaries and was out of place in works of fiction. Perhaps the ultimate source of misunderstanding can be traced to Lang's habitually sardonic and bantering manner. One or two colourfully expressed but essentially casual

judgments like “more claymores, less psychology” have been taken from context and used to damn him subsequently. Lang could not resist a joke, and it too often seems that his critics could not understand one.

Andrew Lang has not been fortunate in his literary trustees. With one or two conspicuous exceptions—one thinks of Roger Lancelyn Green’s *Andrew Lang, a Critical Biography* (1946) and Antonius P. L. de Cocq’s, *Andrew Lang, a Nineteenth Century Anthropologist* (1968)—, writing on Lang has not always been very sympathetic or perceptive. It is a pity that the rather grudging and equivocal tone of the present edition should place it so often in the same category.

Indeed this is doubly disappointing, as it ought to have been evident even on a cursory examination of Lang’s own writing, that he was a figure of major importance, whose insistence that we are not wholly rational, that we are all savages under the skin, contributed significantly to the rediscovery of the “primitive” during the early years of the 20th century, carrying us to within a step of Picasso’s savage masks, *The Waste Land* and *The Rite of Spring*. Lang possessed a virtuosic range, greater even than Scott’s—unique, indeed in Scottish letters; a slashing keenness of mind, essentially negative, a demolisher of other people’s systems at least as much as a constructor of his own, yet still a cultural theorist of inspirational power and penetration.

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