

(2024 March 29) Religion and Madness, Andrew Lang and the SPR - Ledger-Lomas

Call of the Wild

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Andrew Lang: Writer, Folklorist, Democratic Intellect

by John Sloan.

Oxford, 285 pp., £78, June 2023, 978 0 19 286687 5

Troubled by Faith: Insanity and the Supernatural in the Age of the Asylum

by Owen Davies.

Oxford, 350 pp., £25, September 2023, 978 0 19 887300 6

Andrew Lang was in Oxford when he first encountered the living dead. One autumn night in 1869, he passed John Conington, professor of Latin, staring silently at Corpus Christi College. Nothing odd about a distracted don, except that Lang soon learned that Conington had, at that moment, been breathing his last in Boston, Lincolnshire.

Years later, he discussed this ‘real or sham J.C.’ with members of the Society for Psychical Research who wished to include his experience in a treatise called *Phantasms of the Living*. Lang’s short note, addressed from the Savile Club, was genially inconclusive about what he had seen. He was, he admitted, bad with faces, but the lamp light in Oriel Lane had given him ‘a very good view’ and Conington was ‘not easily mistaken ... I know no one in Oxford who was at all like him’ – he was renowned, even in good health, for his greenish complexion. This was enough for the SPR. Even if it were a case of mistaken identity, the ‘coincidence’ of the ‘illusion’ with Conington’s death pangs remained an ‘inexpugnable fact’. When read alongside other records of last gasp apparitions, the case suggested that we could rescue something of ourselves from our perishing bodies.

Lang liked to say that his childhood steeped in the fairy-ridden folklore of the Scottish Borders explained his call to the weird. Sloan shows that it owed more to his frictional relationship with academic institutions. In 1864, he won a Snell Exhibition, which had sent many brilliant students – not least Adam Smith – from Glasgow University to Balliol College, Oxford. The high churchmanship of Oxford often unsettled the Presbyterian certainties of the Balliol Scotch; Archibald Campbell Tait, an exhibitor of a previous generation, even ended up as the archbishop of Canterbury.

As a Scottish Episcopalian, Lang had no Calvinism to shed, but he opposed the efforts of Oxford’s rising liberals to tidy up Christianity. He found Benjamin Jowett’s Hegelised Plato a poor substitute for St Paul and skipped Matthew Arnold’s poetry lectures because they clashed with cricket matches. All the same, he thrived. He won a fellowship at Merton. He translated French roundelays and befriended Walter Pater. It was a world in which everybody seemed to know everybody: Lang’s friend Charlotte Green was the wife of the philosopher T.H. Green and

the sister of John Addington Symonds, the historian of the Renaissance.

But his social successes hid intellectual frustrations. Lang wanted to use his fellowship to make a name for himself in the history of religion. Another friend, the anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor, had convinced him that myths originated independently around the world in the thought processes of 'savage' peoples. Such speculations contradicted the theories of Friedrich Max Müller, the comparative philologist who then dominated Oxford. Müller argued that mythology originated in the spiritual insights of the Aryans of ancient India. Over time their grand words for high thoughts were distorted into the names of divine beings, which were further garbled as they spread across the world. Lang began to sense that Müller was, like George Eliot's Casaubon, trapped in a futile search for a key to all mythologies. But he couldn't say so openly, and so decided to leave Oxford, giving as the reason his impending marriage.

He moved to Kensington, where he became a journalist and began his lifelong battle to achieve financial security. Even brilliant writers, Lang observed, earned only a quarter of what a barrister did – a ratio it would be depressing to revisit today. Sloan's terse summaries just about prevent the sheer mass of Lang's publications from capsizing the biography. Volumes of verse (generally good). Novels (generally not good). A prose translation of Homer (durable). Lives of a Tory statesman and of Walter Scott's biographer (solid). Revisionist histories of Scotland (unpopular in Scotland). He only dropped his pen to whack golf balls, flick fishing rods or browse the bookstalls by the Seine (Henry James thought that Lang was too 'insular and innocent' to appreciate Paris). But he could only afford to be interested in a topic for the time it took to dash off an article about it. As Oxonian contemporaries racked up professorships, he became an aged smatterer, his only titles honorifics.

Sloan vividly illustrates Lang's grouching that 'if I could have made a living out of it, I might have been a great anthropologist.' His writings on anthropology and religion were enriched but also chequered by his effort to stay afloat financially by specialising in everything. His first few books on the subject established him as Tylor's bulldog. Lang argued that philological efforts to trace all myths back to a single fountainhead failed to work at a global scale. In Australia – where Lang had settler relatives who sent him boomerangs – Indigenous Australians who seemed to have no plausible contact with Müller's Aryans still had gods of their own. Mythology evolved independently everywhere due to the universal phenomenon that Tylor called animism. Indigenous peoples, who had not yet formed a sharp distinction between sleeping and waking, explained dreams as the activity of a soul that could detach itself from the body. This encouraged them to ascribe souls to things and animals. Hierarchies gradually emerged: a republic of spirits became an aristocracy of gods and finally the absolute monarchy of one supreme being.

The evolution of religion could be glimpsed in such folkloric customs as blessing someone when they sneezed, which captured the notion that sneezing expelled spirits from the body. In 1877 Lang helped found the Folklore Society to explore such 'survivals'. Its name suggests a kind of ethnonationalism, but he and his colleagues were seeking materials for a universal theory of religion, not the racial essence of their folk. In a review of W.B. Yeats he remarked that there was nothing unique about the beings lurking in the Celtic Twilight: 'The great Celtic phantasmagoria is the world's phantasmagoria.' Sloan evokes the guilt that shrouded Lang's

interest in the primitive vestiges of the British world: his maternal grandfather had been a land agent for the duke of Sutherland, who 'improved' the Highlands by forcing out its uneconomic crofters. When rambling in Glen Urquhart, Lang saw 'smoke hanging in the wet air' above one of the last cottages to be burned down in an eviction.

The detection of 'savages beneath our white skins' exhilarated him. He preferred H. Rider Haggard and Robert Louis Stevenson to Henry James, because their romances seemed to have a primitive gusto. Although Lang co-wrote a fantasy novel with Haggard, his most effective literary use of anthropology came in the form of *The Blue Fairy Book* and the other 'coloured' anthologies he and his wife, Nora, edited for Longman. These books presented fairy tales as 'first made by men who were childlike for their own amusement', in societies yet to discover writing or reason. Children were their ideal readers because they, too, were adept at 'living in fantasy', instinctively accepting that talking animals or invisible friends had a kind of reality. Although Lang has often been seen as a cheerleader for boy's own stories of imperial adventure, these books owed everything to a team of women writers, headed by Nora, who translated and retold the tales with unseen artistry. Lang's belief that all peoples resembled one another in their childhood also insulated him against Eurocentrism: believing that 'black, white and yellow people are fond of just the same kind of adventures,' he introduced his readers to Chinese, Japanese and Arabic tales.

One of the best accounts we have of the malevolent power of Lang's volumes is A.S. Byatt's novel *The Children's Book*, in which Olive Wellwood pays her rickety family's bills by publishing stories whose ever more tangled and subterranean plots track, without revealing, the family's incestuous secrets. The adults who make her a literary celebrity yearn for the mental freedoms of childhood. Her son Tom feels trapped in 'Tom Underground', the story written to entertain him as a child; after the success of its stage adaptation, he drowns himself at Dungeness. Lang's tales similarly have the amoral force of nightmares: they calmly dwell on kinds of cruelty and violence that Victorian society repressed or exported to its margins. An ogre hoping to feast off children slits the throats of his own offspring. 'The Jew' who seizes a wonder-working brass ring is 'tied to the tail of a savage mule loaded with nuts' and 'broken into as many pieces as there were nuts upon the mule's back

Censorious colleagues at the Folklore Society said Lang had jumbled up genuinely ancient tales with the work of Jonathan Swift and the French fabulists, whose fairies and giants were merely their own inventions. Yet this was a literary not a scientific venture, one less interested in curating immemorial fragments than in showing readers what it was like to think with primeval abandon. To open *The Blue Fairy Book* is to plunge into beautifully austere narratives that invert or suspend normality. Cats and wolves speak and dwarfs traverse huge distances in boots that are seven leagues long. Nothing needs to be explained in a world where anything can be real. Bluebeard's blue beard, which causes his future wife to loathe him, is simply that, not a symbol to be decoded. The illustrations, which embed meditative damsels in the haunted thickets of Burne-Jones and the sinister bestiaries of Wagner's *Ring*, deepen the oneiric mood.

The preface to *The Yellow Fairy Book* of 1894 drolly reassured children that 'smoke and schoolmasters' had long since frightened fairies away from England. Yet Lang had by this time

begun to doubt that supernatural experiences were diminishing as modernity advanced. In the age of Lourdes (a place of pilgrimage only since 1858), miracles were as 'common as blackberries'. The founders of the SPR hoped to find convincing proof for anthropologists and other men of science that mediums could enter into contact with the dead. As the historical anthropologist Efram Sera-Shriar has written, Tylor gamely attended séances, but came away from them convinced that the followers of mediums were deluded in the same way 'savages' were. Lang accepted his 'barbaric parallels' but flipped their charge. If so many of his educated contemporaries thought the energies of the spirit world no less real than electricity, then perhaps the 'hallucinations' of past ages were founded on truths, not error. They dimly captured powers that were supernormal, rather than supernatural, because they proceeded from an 'X region of our nature', which science had yet to investigate.

Whereas historians of religion today enlist anthropologists to make sense of their sources, Lang invoked the 'science of the history of religion' to rebuke the anthropologists. A radical antiquarian, he insisted that the truth claims of historical attestations to the supernatural be sifted on their merits, not struck out for failing to pass modern standards of rationality. 'Cock Lane and Common Sense', the title essay of the 1894 book that announced his rebellion against Tylor, encapsulates his method. The Hanoverian investigators of an eerie tapping heard in a London house – Dr Johnson among them – satisfied themselves that the landlord's daughter had faked it. Yet the scratches she made under observation produced different sounds to those heard by early witnesses, which resembled those attested in many other times and places. Could we say that a murdered woman haunted Cock Lane? No. But nor did the surviving evidence allow us to dismiss the happenings there as delusions. An address to the SPR on the 'Voices of Jeanne d'Arc' is another bravura display of Lang's hermeneutic of non-suspicion. It was easy to assume that because the saints spoke to Joan, she had been hysterical, or superstitious, or both. But the chroniclers described Joan as cheerful and robust; she listened to her voices calmly. They were counsellors, not an inner compulsion.

Had Joan heard from the saints as she – or John Henry Newman – would have understood that term? Lang did not much care. The price he exacted for preserving the outré phenomena of religious history was their transference from theology to an expanded but recognisably scientific psychology. Sloan finds no glimmers of personal piety in Lang's life. Yet whether or not he believed in the Christian God, he bridled at His slapdash detractors, the worst of whom was the anthropologist James George Frazer, a Presbyterian atheist. Although T.S. Eliot used Frazer's *The Golden Bough* as a grab bag of incantations to destabilise the modern mind, its argument was punishingly rationalist. Before religion there had been magic, with which peoples protected their crops. When it failed, they transferred their faith to vegetable deities, whose sacrificial deaths mimicked the rhythms of the seasons. The resurrected Christ was just the most successful of these slain gods, the details of His Passion deriving from the ritual deaths of Persian and Babylonian kings, which the Jewish festival of Purim supposedly recalled when it marked the killing of the royal official Haman. Lang delighted in poking holes in Frazer's account of the Crucifixion. Christ was not Haman and Calvary had nothing to do with Babylon. It wasn't just Frazer's scholarship that was shaky, Lang believed; his foundational assumptions were, too. Magic was not the stepmother of religion, but often its sibling: the witchcraft trials of the early modern era suggested that magical beliefs often thrive in periods of intense religious excitement.

Lang styled himself an ‘outcast from the church anthropological’, but its members did not so much anathematise as patronise him. Frazer commented after Lang’s death that he should have stuck to ‘pure literature’. Towards the end of his life, Lang succumbed to melancholy. When he saw a black cat run across his study, he dismissed it as ‘obviously hallucinatory’ and probably a symptom of macular degeneration, but couldn’t help greeting it as the old portent of doom in his family, which was no stranger to insanity. Shortly before his death at the age of 68 in 1912, he raved to Nora that they should move to America because ‘awful calamities were about to befall Europe.’ A few years later, soldiers were said to have seen angels in the sky over Flanders and civilians flocked to séances to speak to their beloved dead.

Popular enthusiasm for the angels of Mons came as a reverse for the psychiatrists who for decades had tried to establish distinctions between sane and insane beliefs. In *Troubled by Faith*, Owen Davies considers their ambitious attempts to eliminate religious claims to supernatural experience by pathologising them. ‘Psychiatrists’ is a pardonable anachronism for professionals who were generally called asylum physicians. Their intellectual confidence reflected the steady rise in the number of asylums, which housed a hundred thousand patients in Britain by the turn of the 20th century. Davies makes a convincing, though limited, case for the significance of asylums to debates about religion and the supernatural. They were never the total institutions imagined by Foucault, the outcrops of a vast discursive shift in the policing of minds. It was difficult to end up in an asylum, unless your relatives agreed to do the paperwork to send you there. A majority of those who were committed stayed for less than a year and were rarely subjected to ambitious therapies. A consistently small proportion of inmates were classed as insane on religious grounds, much lower than those admitted for alcoholism. Yet British psychiatrists still had a big enough caseload to write voluminously on religious insanity.

They leaned heavily on anti-clerical French theorists, who had developed a taxonomy of pathologies to challenge the jurisdiction of the Church over cases of demonic possession. Jean-Étienne Esquirol’s concept of religious monomania, which explained the way beliefs gripped otherwise healthy victims, became the basis for many boutique diagnoses. Think you’re the messiah? It’s a nasty case of theomania. Put your faith in spiritualist mediums? You’ve succumbed to mediomania or spiritualistic madness. So great was the proliferation of such conditions that by the late 19th century international psychiatric conferences dedicated themselves to reducing their number. There were also shifts in fashion: monomania began to disappear as Charcot’s theory of ‘hysteria’ established itself as a totalising explanation for everything from hallucinations to demonic possession.

It was one thing to develop a theoretical understanding of how and why people’s talk of spirits or witches made them mad, another to get lawyers to accept it. From the bench, judges sneered at ‘experts in madness’. Even a display of the wildest of beliefs would not necessarily help a criminal defendant dodge the 1843 M’Naghten rules, which cleared him only if he did not ‘know the nature and quality of the act he was doing; or if he did know it, that he did not know he was doing what was wrong’. The effort to make certain beliefs symptomatic of insanity also foundered during the contestation of wills. Many lawyers urged that a testator’s belief in witchcraft or mediums did not make them so irrational that they could not dispose of their property. Great minds once believed in witches, while the growing popularity of séances

suggested that a belief in spiritualism was mistaken but still reasonable.

No wonder many psychiatrists preferred to apply their science to the dead rather than the living. Davies talks of a 'golden age of retrospective diagnoses', which involved patients as various as Socrates, Jesus and John Wesley. The early modern witchcraft trials were a popular hunting ground. A belief in sorcery had once seemed a hallmark of ignorance; now it became a pathology. Psychiatrists wondered if witches should have been sent to the asylum, not the stake. It was perhaps harder to medicalise their persecutors. Could demonomania grip an entire society? Some psychiatrists argued weakly that witch-hunters suffered from an 'insane opinion', without being 'individually insane'. Although the interest in viewing such phenomena as mass possession or religious revivals as expressions of bespoke pathologies faded over time, Davies neatly shows that psychoanalysts would in turn collapse the past with the present. Freud read demonological treatises as guides not to madness but neurosis: they charted movements of hysteria and sexual repression as ordinary as their discussion by early modern believers had been lurid.

The second half of Davies's book contrasts the strident reductionism of the psychiatrists with the voices of their patients, who speak to us faintly through asylum records but with powerful directness in their surviving letters. These sources reveal complex connections between religious belief and insanity. A denomination's dogmas might generate certain varieties of supernatural experience. The acrid sectarianism of Presbyterianism explains one man's faith that he was 'elected to destroy all those who did not belong to the established Church of Scotland'. But madness was an ecumenical matter. All denominations saw angels. A Jewish Mancunian believed that the freemasons were stealing his semen, a Belfast Presbyterian that spiritualists had forced his semen up into his neck. Mad talk also shows us how ineffectual were efforts by churches to discipline the religious imagination of the people with Bibles and catechisms. Inmates tailored scripture to their compulsions with a magic literalism, as in the case of Margaret Joynt, a young woman who said she had the Star of Bethlehem in her eye. Then again, the hermeneutics of many churches were no less weird: Joynt belonged to the Catholic Apostolic Church, whose founders claimed to have the gift of speaking in tongues. It was the context rather than the content of Joynt's speech that made her claim a question of mental health rather than theology: shortly after her release from the asylum, she killed herself by drinking carbolic acid.

It wasn't a belief in the supernatural that marked someone out as insane, but the judgment of the authorities that this belief was held with harmful vehemence. One inmate who proclaimed himself to be Jesus was actually committed for striking a cab horse with an axe. Doctors wouldn't call you mad if you saw the ghost of a loved one, but they might if, over time, the ghost kept saying the wrong thing or refused to disappear. A vision could also become a pathological hallucination if it happened in the wrong place. Mary Lavery, who saw the Virgin Mary outside a Manchester railway station in 1892, ended up in Prestwich asylum – but in ultramontane France, she might have emulated Bernadette Soubirous and become a saint.

Religion and madness developed parallel responses to the psychic stresses of modernity. Churches metabolised the technological innovation of capitalist society, turning railroads and telegraphs into instruments of evangelisation or metaphors for spirituality. Asylum inmates were equally resourceful, explaining that hydraulic tubes or telephones were conduits for the telepathic

malevolence of demons or Jesuits. Theologians mimicked rationality in their defence of faith against it. The inmates Davies discusses did no less – the doctor of a man who said he had put Satan in a bottle admitted he ‘argues tolerably well upon his absurd premises’. It was easier for the mad, as for the religious, to describe the coherence of their system than to convince others of its correspondence with reality. One inmate ended his letter explaining how demons abuse electricity with the plea: ‘don’t imagine I am insane because I write this from a lunatic asylum.’”