# Andrew Lang and the Making of Myth

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The latest acquisition in my Andrew Lang collection is a 1979 New York reissue of *The Princess Nobody: a Tale of Fairy Land*, first published in 1884 with illustrations by Richard 'Dicky' Doyle. There have also been modern reprints of several of Lang's multicoloured fairy books, and of the novel he wrote in collaboration with H. Rider Haggard, *The World's Desire*, which again moves in the realm of fantasy, telling as it does the story of the further wanderings of Odysseus to Egypt in search of the immortal Helen of Troy. First published in 1890, the reprint dates from 1972, and in a short Preface, the editor of the series in which it appears laments that Lang 'wrote all too few novels himself'. Indeed it was a pity. As it is, in the world of books, Lang tends to be remembered as a teller or reteller of fairy tales, and therefore as an entertainer of the young.

But he received an unexpected mention (coincidentally, also in 1972) in Thomas Keneally's novel *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*. Jimmie has a half-brother, Mort, who is made very angry by being told by McCreadie that a certain Andrew Lang has been writing down Aboriginal totem secrets. Jimmie too is drawn into the discussion, is made angry in his turn, but then writes Andrew Lang off as 'just a prying bastard'.<sup>2</sup> Although the episode stretches credibility, the fact remains that particularly in the last dozen or so years of his life, Lang did write a good deal about totems and totemism.<sup>3</sup> It is not his best writing, though. Normally Lang is an informative, lucid (if not always accurate) and entertaining writer. But on the entry of totemism, his muse deserted him. Perhaps out of sheer exhaustion.

One is tempted to imagine sometimes that Andrew Lang, who was born in Selkirk, Scotland, on March 31, 1844 and died at Banchory, near Aberdeen, just before midnight on July 20, 1912, at the age of 68, was a syndicate rather than a mortal. His output was vast. From his home in South Kensington (to which I once paid a dutiful pilgrimage, only to find it a depressing block of flats) he was able in his crabbed handwriting to produce what must have been thousands of words daily on a vast array of subjects - indeed, on whatever interested him, while ignoring steadfastly whatever did not. Lang is (or was) celebrated in many of the interconnected mansions of letters: literary criticism, history, anthropology, classical studies, biography. He wrote a great deal of verse, and though no one would want to claim him as a major poet, it must be

acknowledged that his verse output was neat, tidy, professional and often entertaining.<sup>5</sup> Also he was an enthusiastic cricketer and fisherman. But among his specializations were Homer, Joan of Arc, Bonnie Prince Charlie - and Sir Walter Scott. It is to Sir Walter that we must return in just a moment. But first a brief word about that much-abused term, 'myth'.<sup>6</sup>

It is an additional irony, alongside Lang's demotion from the academy to the nursery, that in popular parlance, the subject he dealt with best, mythology, should similarly have been demoted from the realm of meaning to that of mischief. In our day and our newspapers, a myth is simply a falsehood, born of misunderstanding and sustained by ignorance, though with this modification - that first one myth and then another has had its day and has been found out, unmasked, exploded, discredited, debunked or otherwise shown up for the fraud we in our infinite wisdom have discovered it to be. Again in popular usage, 'mythology' serves more or less as a collective noun, based on 'myth', but without the necessary element of critical examination.

A 'myth' is not an isolated error, or indeed an error at all. A myth is necessarily a narrative, a story, a sequence of episodes with a scenario and *dramatis personae* - though whether human, non-human or a combination of the two does not matter. Myth will as a matter of course take the place of history where the actual historical circumstances are inaccessible, unknown, or (not infrequently) forgotten. Myth explains. Myth interprets and organizes. And why should we not also add that myth entertains, bearing in mind that narratives were actually narrated.

One kind of narrative of course shades into another, less elaborate, less solemn. Often this lower order of narrative had to do with persons and supernaturals at the lower, rather than the upper end of their respective hierarchies. Myth shades into legend, legend into Märchen, folktale and ballad and folksong and fairytale; and no one who is seriously interested in the one, it seems to me, can (or should) fail to have an interest in the humbler forms of the genre.

Andrew Lang's birthplace is a bare half-dozen miles from that 'incongruous pile', Abbotsford, built (or at any rate, rebuilt) by Sir Walter Scott as a visible expression of his lifelong dream of being the perfect Border Laird, and not much farther from Melrose Abbey, where Scott was buried in 1831. In the regional history of literature in Britain, we have Wordsworth's Lakeland, Hardy's Wessex - and then, in a class of its own, we have Scott's Border country.

The study of Lang begins with Scott. Lang's allegiance to Scott never wavered. 'Scott is not an author like another,' he wrote late in his career, 'but

our earliest known friend in letters...'. Lang's admiration for Scott knew no bounds, though that was unremarkable enough in a Scotsman of his generation. What is more interesting is the way in which Scott provided Lang at various points with a philosophy of life, though not really a religion. I shall return to the question of the nature of Lang's religious allegiance, but in the meantime, what Lang wrote of Scott in his 1906 biography might have applied to either of them: 'Neither his friends nor he himself knew the precise frontiers of his belief and disbelief'. Another statement which might just as well be autobiographical as biographical was that: 'Of love as of human life he [Scott] knew too much to speak. He did not "make copy" of his deepest thoughts or of his deepest affections'. One one occasion Lang claimed that Scott had provided him, at the age of about ten (!) with a personal philosophy, in the shape of Lucy Ashton's song from *The Bride of Lammermoor*:

Look not thou on beauty's charming, Sit thou still when kings are arming, Taste not when the wine-cup glistens, Speak not when the people listens, Stop thine ear against the singer, From the red gold keep thy finger, Vacant heart, and hand, and eye, Easy live and quiet die. 10

Another area of intriguing resemblance has to do with what most would no doubt still want to call 'superstition', that is the praeternatural part of folklore, where there are omens and familiar spirits and hauntings, witches and warlocks. Scott's fascination with the occult is well known, though his late letters to his son-in-law J. G. Lockhart on *Demonology and Witchcraft* (1830) are a dull performance. Like others belonging to the late 18th and early 19th centuries, Kant being another example, Scott lived most of his life under the constraints of the Age of Reason, and in his writings has his characters speaking the dullest English imaginable. But then the curtain lifts, his dialogues revert to the Doric and his characters come to life, superstitions and all. There were two sides to his mind: the sturdily rational suited to the law-courts; and the flexibly instinctive, found even then among the outdoor people more often than in the drawing rooms.

Scott died before the term 'folklore' was coined. Nevertheless he was a folklorist of distinction: ballad collector (and alas 'improver'), chronicler and much else. This was important enough in itself as an influence on Lang. But there was one very specific statement, thrown off by Scott almost casually in his 1830 notes to *The Lady of the Lake*, which pointed towards precisely that investigation which Lang was to make his own. Its key sentence reads:

The mythology of one period would then appear to pass into the romance of the next century, and that into the nursery-tale of the subsequent ages.<sup>12</sup>

The result of this would be a 'wide diffusion of popular fiction', and this, thought Scott, would be a matter well worth investigation.

Lang's knowledge of Scott's writings was meticulous. My own edition of the Waverley Novels is the 'Border Edition' of 1892, 48 volumes, with each novel supplied with a sometimes quite long critical introduction by Andrew Lang. There was perhaps only one area in which Lang thought the master lacking: it was a matter of regret that Scott, 'the most Homeric of later poets', knew little or nothing of Homer.<sup>13</sup>

After Scott in Lang's apprenticeship to the craft of mythology came his introduction to Homer during his student days. For the record, his schooling began at the Edinburgh Academy in 1854. In 1861 he moved on to the University of St Andrews, and farther on to Balliol College, Oxford in 1864. At Oxford he took a first in Classical Moderations in 1866, and a first in Greats two years later, in 1868. It is also worth a mention that he and the six-yearsyounger Robert Louis Stevenson were related by marriage, and that both attended the Edinburgh Academy, though at different times. They did not in fact meet until 1874 - on the Riviera, where both had been packed off in search of better health - and seem not to have got on too well together at first. One is tempted to speak of Languid Lang meeting Scruffy Stevenson, and neither much liking what he saw.14 Soon though they found common ground behind their respective façades. Lang recorded in later years that where Stevenson was concerned, he soon became 'an admirer, a devotee, a fanatic'15, though in comparison with Stevenson the 'wild singing bird', Lang counted himself no more than a 'domesticated barn-door fowl'.16 All the same they shared the mischievous characteristic later described by Lang as 'a determined love of saying things as the newspapers do not say them'.17

In Lang's years from 1861 to 1864 at St Andrews, he was still only a teenager, albeit with strong romantic leanings which carried him into the mists of the past rather than the migraines of the present. He was reading Dasent's *Tales from the Norse* and *Njal's Saga*, and the *Mabinogion*; and it is recorded that the first work of his to appear in print, in an undergraduate magazine, was entitled, 'Myths and the Diffusion of Tales' - precisely the question raised by Scott thirty years earlier.<sup>18</sup>

Romance, however, has very limited staying power on its own, and at St Andrews and Oxford, Lang was laying some very firm scholarly foundations for what might in other conditions have been a highly successful academic career as a classicist. Chiefly he was acquiring a profound and very precise knowledge of Greek. He always disclaimed being an exact scholar-

and very irritating it is, in such a celebrated translator and interpreter as he was to become. One has met a certain kind of philologist, who seems to have no interest whatever in what the text under examination is actually saying. (Professor Enoch Powell of the University of Sydney is reputed to have been such a one.) Lang could never have been of that persuasion. It was the *mythos* that fascinated him - the myth, the story, the drama, the narrative. At school, he once said, he had found Greek 'a mere vacuous terror'. But then he found Homer.

Lang's translation of the *Odyssey* (with S. H. Butcher) appeared in 1879. his translation of the *Iliad* (with Walter Leaf and Ernest Myers) in 1883. I do not know what their standing might be in the present-day world of Homeric scholarship. But they were clearly highly regarded in their day. Added to which, Lang had strong views on the so-called 'Homeric question' - that is, the question of whether Homer was a solitary genius or a syndicate, and whether the Trojan wars actually took place. The Andrew Lang Lecture for 1928, by Alexander Shewan, was on 'Andrew Lang's Work for Homer', in the course of which Shewan remarked on the effect of a 'monstrous regiment of phantoms' creating out of a few legitimate concerns a solemn parody of (mainly Teutonic) scholarship. 20 Lang always had a delight in controversy, in exposing what he saw as absurdities, and (perversely perhaps) in championing the cause of the underdog. So in this case. Lang's three Homeric books, Homer and the Epic (1893), Homer and his Age (1908) and The World of Homer (1910), spoke out strongly in favour of Homeric unity - which. I think, is not quite the same thing as saying that the same hand wrote, or the same voice spoke it all. Whether he proved his case, I am too little of a classicist to know. But as I said just now, in Homer as in Scott, it was the mythos that fascinated him, the action, the narrative. 'The epics were to him the reflection of a world that was a world of fact,' writes Shewan,21 Not a world of solemn inventions.

Andrew Lang took up residence at Balliol College, Oxford in 1864, and remained in Oxford until 1875, when he married and resigned his Merton fellowship, which he had held for a mere six years. Thereafter he lived in London.

One may perhaps be forgiven for supposing that in these years in Oxford, the chief intellectual issues were those which had blown up in the wake of Darwin's Origin of Species. And so they were, in a sense. But for Oxford's part, a much greater stir was caused in 1860 by the publication of a volume entitled simply Essays and Reviews, written by seven Oxford men, six of them clergymen of the Church of England. This book, it has been said, 'marks a turning-point in the history of English theological opinion', not for the novelty of its contents, but because its authors 'helped to win for the Church the right of free enquiry'22. They did not however win that right at a stroke. And in the

same year, 1860, another Oxford skirmish over the Boden Professorship of Sanskrit resulted in the victory of the evangelical Monier Monier-Williams over the liberal theist Friedrich Max Müller, so soon to become Andrew Lang's chief opponent in the battle of the mythologists.<sup>23</sup> In 1860, however, Lang was still a schoolboy in Edinburgh. The mighty Max for his part (almost twenty years his senior) had already published his seminal essay on *Comparative Mythology* (1856), and was labouring away at his pioneering edition of the *Rig Veda*, completed in 1873. Incidentally, he also enjoyed excellent relations with the scholarly and refined Broad Church party in the Church of England, the leader of which was A. P. Stanley (Dean of Westminster from 1864 to 1881), but the most persuasive voice of which belonged to Matthew Arnold (1822-1888).

After Scott, the second great personal influence on Andrew Lang's development was exercised by Arnold, who was Professor of Poetry at Oxford from 1857 to 1867. For the last three of these years Lang was at Balliol (which was also Arnold's college), and he could have attended Arnold's lectures, though how many of them he in fact heard must remain a moot point. He did however seem to have heard some of the lectures afterward published as *The Study of Celtic Literature* (1867), which were very much in line with Lang's interests at the time. Over and above this, though, Lang was captivated by Arnold's poetry. 'Mr Arnold's poetry is to me... [he once wrote] what Wordsworth's was to his generation'.<sup>24</sup>

It ought perhaps to have been said before now that if Lang did not become a poet of the first rank, it was not for want of trying. His ideal, learned certainly from Scott, was the large-scale narrative poem, if nothing quite as massive as the epic. But his gifts were much more those of the miniaturist, and when he tried a work on the large scale, Helen of Troy (1882), it fell sadly flat. Edmund Gosse thought that it was Lang's bitter disappointment at the sad fate of what ought to have been his masterpiece, which made him less serious a poet, though that is by the way.

Lang does not appear ever to have known Arnold particularly well, though he so admired 'the one Oxford poet of Oxford' that it has been suggested that he adopted some of the older man's mannerisms. Beyond that, though, I would suggest that we might perhaps get a clearer picture of Lang's personal religion if we relate it to Arnold's Broad Church Anglicanism. This would perhaps not be an important issue at all, were it not for the fact that after his 'Darwinian' phase, which lasted throughout the 1870s and 1880s and involved viewing mythology largely as a matter of primitive survivals, in the last twenty years of his life he more or less uncoupled religion from mythology, and declared that the evidence went to show that ethical monotheism of a kind had been present with the human race from the very first. J. G. Frazer's recent biographer Robert

Ackerman is one of those scandalized (it would seem) by the thought of Lang's 'defection' from Darwinian orthodoxy a century ago.<sup>26</sup>

This is too complex an issue to introduce so late in the piece. But so much may at least be said: that in his youth Lang had simply refused to learn the Christianity of the Shorter Catechism, and therefore had never needed to unlearn it.<sup>27</sup> He had little enough of conventional Christian faith - but then, no more did many other worthy Victorians. He was in addition an intensely private man - his only really angry piece of writing of which I am aware was a letter to a 'young journalist', lambasting the gutter press in general, and gossip columnists in particular: 'Never write for publication one line of personal tattle. Let all men's persons and private lives be as sacred to you as your father's... Once begin to print private conversation, and you are lost.' <sup>28</sup>

There are in fact hints enough in Lang's output that life was to him a serious business indeed. It was the romance of it that fascinated him, the action, the drama, the endless episodes, the oddities as well as the sublimities, the grotesques and gargoyles as well as the gods and goddesses. Late in life, in one of the few fragments of autobiography he gave us, he wrote:

I am not likely to regret the accident which brought me up on fairy tales and the inquisitiveness which led me to examine the other fragments of antiquity. But the poetry and the significance of them are apt to be hidden by the enormous crowd of details. Only late we find the true meaning of what seems like a mass of fantastic, savage eccentricities.<sup>29</sup>

The true meaning? To be mythologically correct when Lang was an undergraduate meant to subscribe to the doctrine stated with Teutonic pondus, and apparently for all time, by Friedrich Max Müller: that mythology is a diseased remnant of religion. The disease originated with language. Put crudely, nouns labelling things become persons: masculine nouns males, feminine nouns females. Then the stories begin to be told, most of them, according to Müller, circling around the sun. 'Mythology is only a dialect, an ancient form of language... But mythology is neither philosophy, nor history, nor religion, nor ethics. It is... something formal, not something substantial...' 30

This was written in 1858. Then came Darwin and Spencer and the evolutionists. After reading E. B. Tylor's *Primitive Culture* (1871), Lang joined them. All the tales, all the adventures, all the romances - all had begun in the childhood of the human race. After a preliminary run-through in an article for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Lang explained fully in what has always been his major work in the field, *Myth*, *Ritual and Religion* (1887). His major objection to Max Müller was that the mighty Max had failed to explain the most troublesome aspect of myths, namely, their irrationality; but also that in limiting his inquiries to the field of Aryan (Indo-European) languages, and

accounting for the nature of myth solely with reference to those languages, he had left wide open all the world's other language areas, of which there were a fair number! Lang found the task of demolishing the Müller theory rather easy, 'proving', using the methods of the solar mythologists, that Gladstone and Bismarck were no more than solar myths, and that the existence of Max Müller himself was at least doubtful.

And Lang's own view? First, that once there was a historical condition of the human intellect in which what seems to us irrational, could be regarded as rational enough. Access to that layer of the human psyche could be gained through the twin approaches of anthropology and folklore. And secondly, that the whole of humanity has passed through that mental stage, which goes a good way toward explaining the universal diffusion of the stories.

Dare one say that while Max Müller knew language - chiefly of the Indo-European variety - Lang knew myth, in its essential aspect of drama and narrative? Romantic or not, Max Müller's outlook was aristocratically rationalist: he could not bear there to be any loose ends in his theory of knowledge, with its stages of language, mythology, religion and thought itself (on each of which he wrote a 'science of' book). Lang's universe has cracks in it. Once, almost by accident, he hinted that religion might have begun among the shamans and shape-changers rather than in some primal senior common room: almost certainly he was right. Because he knew the stories people have told, he knew what manner of animal homo sapiens can be. I do not fancy that any of his anthropological or folklorist or literary contemporaries could have written this sentence, from Myth, Ritual and Religion. Does this not describe remarkably well the region of the as yet unlabelled subconscious? He is characterizing myth:

The dead and the living, men, beasts, and gods, trees and stars, and rivers, and sun, and moon, dance through the region of myths in a burlesque ballet of Priapus, where everything may be anything, where nature has no laws and imagination no limits.<sup>32</sup>

As a footnote, mention of the ballet of Priapus reminds me that had it not been for Andrew Lang, Sigmund Freud would never have hit upon the bizarre theory on which his *Totem and Taboo* is based - a book cast adrift on an unsuspecting world in the year Lang died, 1912. For had it not been for Lang, the 'primal horde' theory put forward by his kinsman James Jasper Atkinson in their joint book *Primal Law* (1903) would never have seen the light of day, not least since Atkinson had died in 1899.<sup>33</sup>

Lang's secret, where the making of myth was concerned, was that in the best sense he was himself a *maker* of myth, and not merely a *critic* of the myths made by others. That the trail of myth should have led from the walls of Troy

to the late Victorian nursery is remarkable enough in itself. That the sequence should have found a single devoted interpreter is still more remarkable, bearing also in mind the constraints of the time in which he wrote. How do we characterize him? Roger Lancelyn Green tries 'the divine amateur', 'the disinherited dreamer', 'the great interpreter' and 'the literary man at play'. But Edmund Gosse was surely right, that 'If we consider him too gravely, we lose him altogether' - the way we lose more and more of a dream, the harder we try to recall it.

#### Notes

- 1. Lin Carter, in Haggard and Lang, *The World's Desire*, London, 1972, p. xiv. The only other genuine novel Lang wrote, if we omit his children's stories, was *A Monk of Fife*(1896), a by-product of his Joan of Arc studies.
- Thomas Keneally, The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith, Fontana reprint, 1978, pp. 144,146.
- 3. A.P.L. de Cocq, Andrew Lang, a Nineteenth Century Anthropologist, Tilburg (Dissertation, Utrecht), 1968, pp. 117ff.
- 4. Relatively little has been written about Andrew Lang, and the only book that approaches a full-scale study is Roger Lancelyn Green, Andrew Lang: A Critical Biography, Leicester, 1946. But see also de Cocq's dissertation, mentioned in the previous note; and most recently Eleanor De Selms Langstaff, Andrew Lang, Boston, 1978. Cf. Andrew Duff-Cooper, 'Andrew Lang: Aspects of his Work in Relation to Current Social Anthropology', Folklore 97, No. 2 (1986), pp. 186-205. Of outstanding value are the ten Andrew Lang Lectures delivered before the University of St. Andrews, 1927-1937, and published in one volume, Concerning Andrew Lang. Oxford, 1949.
- 5. A four-volume collection of his verse, edited by his widow, was published in 1923.
- 6. Recent literature on myth is vast, and it would serve little purpose to pick and choose among the titles. Mention may however be made of a new series, *Theorists of Myth*, edited by Robert A. Segal and published by Garland in New York. I have been asked to contribute a volume on Lang to this series.
- 7. Lang, Adventures among Books, 1905, third impression London, 1912, p. 9.
- 8. Lang, Sir Walter Scott, London, 1906, p. 153.
- 9. Ibid., p. 26.
- Scott, The Bride of Lammermoor (The Border Edition of the Waverley Novels, vol. XIV), London, 1893, p. 38ff.
- 11. Richard M. Dorson, The British Folklorists: A History, Chicago, 1968, pp. 107ff.
- 12. Scott, The Lady of the Lake, London, 1861, p. 366 (Note M).
- 13. Lang, Sir Walter Scott, p. 16.
- 14. Green, op. cit., p. 38f. I should perhaps add that the adjectives are mine, and should not be blamed on the late Mr. Green.
- 15. Lang, Adventures, p. 44.
- 16. Ibid., p. 50.
- 17 Lang, Essays in Little, London, 1891, p. 27.
- 18. De Cocq, op. cit., p. 13.
- 19. Quoted by Green, op. cit., p. 17.

- 20. Alexander Shewan, Andrew Lang's Work for Homer, London, 1929.
- 21. Ibid., p. 25.
- V. F. Storr, The Development of English Theology in the Nineteenth Century, London, 1913, p. 429. Cf. D.C. Somervell, English Thought in the Nineteenth Century, London, 1929, p. 119; S.C. Carpenter, Church and People 1789-1889, London, 1933, pp. 506ff.
- E.J. Sharpe, Not to Destroy but to Fulfil, Uppsala, 1965, pp. 43ff.; Comparative Religion: A History, London, 1975, pp. 36ff.; 60ff. On the 1860 election, see Nirad C. Chaudhuri, Scholar Extraordinary: The Life of Professor the Rt. Hon. Friedrich Max Müller, P.C., London, 1974, pp. 221ff.
- 24. Lang, Letters on Literature, London, 1892, p. 11.
- 25. Edmund Gosse, 'Andrew Lang,' in Silhouettes, London, 1925, p. 168ff.: 'The author's disappointment [at the chilly reception of *Helen*], was acute, and the consequence was that, until the end of his life, although he continued to rhyme with voluble assiduity, he never again took pains to make his poetry first-rate.'
- 26. Robert Ackerman, J. G. Frazer: His Life and Work, Cambridge University Press, Canto edition 1990, p. 153: 'The secret was out: Lang was (had always been?) a Christian.' Quite possibly. What kind of Christian, is the real issue. It is at least worth a mention that the only early Christian authority he habitually quoted with approval was Eusebius of Caesarea.
- 27. Lang, Adventures, p. 23. This statement need not however be taken entirely at face value. He may not have cared for the Shorter Catechism, but he was sufficiently interested in its background to write a 280-page monograph on John Knox and the Reformation (London 1905). 'He [Knox] was a child of the old pre-Christian scriptures; of the earlier, not of the later prophets' (p. 51).
- 28. Lang, Essays in Little, p. 196.
- 29. Lang, Adventures among Books, p. 38.
- 30. F. Max Müller, Chips from a German Workshop II, London, 1867, p. 143.
- 31. Lang, Cock Lane and Common-Sense, London, 1894, p. 172ff. Lang is here discussing 'superstition' in the Hellenistic world. He writes: 'Religion, which began in Shamanism, in the trances of Angakut and Birraark, returned to these again, and everywhere found marvel, mystery, imposture, conscious or unconscious. The phenomena have never ceased...'
- 32. Lang, Myth, Ritual and Religion I, London, 1887, p. 10.
- 33. Mircea Eliade, *The Quest*, Chicago 1969, p. 12ff. Practically all the publications mentioned in Eliade's essay as landmarks in the study of religion in 1912 were in one way or another indebted to Lang's insights and intuitions, though I do not have the space to elaborate here.
- 34. Gosse, Silhouettes, p. 170.