

# Passion and Pedantry

by E. Christian Kopff

*"Lord, what would they say  
Did their Catullus walk this way?"*  
—W.B. Yeats

**Gilbert Murray, OM. 1866-1957**  
by Sir Duncan Wilson  
Oxford: Clarendon Press;  
488 pp., \$49.95

**J.G. Frazer: His Life and Work**  
by Robert Ackerman  
Cambridge: Cambridge University  
Press; 380 pp., \$39.50

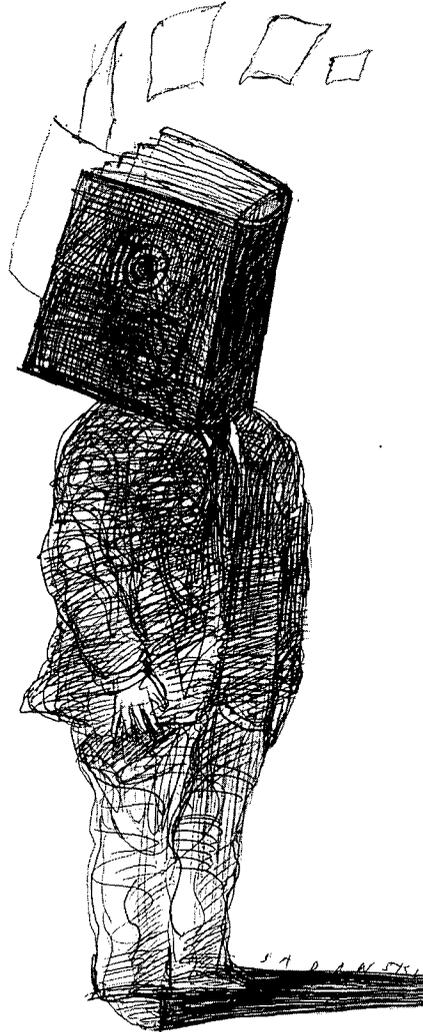
William Butler Yeats's picture of the scholar is not a pretty one ("All cough in ink. All wear the carpet with their shoes.") and literature does not give us many scholarly heroes. Most literary pedants are like George Eliot's Casaubon; boring, impotent in the face of the real world, and, ultimately, not even a very good scholar. The rare positive image comes from popular entertainment—Van Helsing and Indiana Jones. Even as men of letters, few academics have any impact outside university circles.

It was different in the last Silver Age of Western civilization, before World War I. To take England and the field of classics, for example, it is easy to think of three men with solid scholarly reputations whose names were well known outside the groves of academe: A.E. Housman, Sir James George Frazer, and Gilbert Murray.

Of the three, Housman's work has stood up best. On either side of the Great War there was a popular frenzy for his poetry and there still remains a committed group of readers and reciters, some of whom, such as John Sparrow and Christopher Ricks, are distinguished critics. His scholarly writings and critical editions are still important for the subjects he worked on, and his prose is read with pleasure. His academic career was spotty. As an undergraduate at Oxford, he never won a prize for Latin verse composition and "was plou-

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ghed in Greats," that is, failed his final exams. After taking a pass degree, he won recognition by his published works and became professor of Latin first at London and then at Cambridge. Although he was a best-selling author and a political conservative, his career advanced on the basis of its objective merit. Feminists in classics boast that no similar figure could survive today.

Frazer won a fellowship at Trinity College, Cambridge, after studying at Glasgow in his native Scotland. It was while holding a fellowship that he made his contributions to scholarship. Cam-

bridge gave him no other academic honor, although he won a professorship at Liverpool, honorary degrees from Oxford and the Sorbonne, and a knighthood. (After World War I friends did establish the Frazer Lectureship at Cambridge.) He framed his career with long scholarly commentaries on lesser works of classical literature. He interrupted this work to produce the first edition of *The Golden Bough* in two volumes in 1890. The third edition appeared from 1911-1915 in 12 volumes. Both the first and third editions were reprinted as late as the 1970's, and the one-volume abridgment of 1922 was a best-seller. In his own day the combination of 18th-century pomposity and immense learning won him fame that reached popular adulation. The books, dissertations, and articles on Frazer's influence and "impact" have by no means exhausted the study of his significance. Stanley Edgar Hyman's *The Tangled Bank* (1956) ranks Frazer with Darwin, Marx, and Freud. In recent decades, some of the most creative scholars in the humanities are still citing and discussing Frazer, as one can see in Rene Girard's study of the scapegoat and Walter Burkert's work on ritual in Greek tragedy and mythology. (Robert Ackerman knows nothing of this, but instead tells us that "Not only are his answers superseded, but more important his questions likewise are no longer relevant.")

Gilbert Murray had a most spectacular academic career, winning prize after prize at his public school and at Oxford. Directly out of university, he was appointed to the chair of Greek at Glasgow because of his marvelous ability to compose Greek prose. He resigned after ten years, but in 1908 was appointed Regius Professor of Greek at Oxford, which chair he held until 1936. His translations of Euripides were the standard English versions for the first half of the century. Before

World War I he was a major figure in the theatrical cult of "Ibsenity." The figure of Adolphus Cusins in Shaw's *Major Barbara* is modeled on Murray. (His wife and mother-in-law appear as Barbara and her mother. Shaw jokingly called the play "Murray's Mother-in-Law.") His scholarly writing before the Great War was of international significance. After the war he headed the League of Nations Union, and his books and talks on the BBC continued to appear until his death. Both Frazer and Murray were awarded the Order of Merit. Housman turned it down.

The contemporary reader may well ask why three such creative figures chose to become what Ackerman calls "professional students of that least practical of subjects, classics." As Ackerman's own survey of the Cambridge examination system shows, knowledge of Greek and Latin was essential for anyone interested in an academic or religious career in 19th-century England. Greek was a prerequisite for study at Oxford until 1920. (Gilbert Murray sold out the pass to the modernists.) Apart from that historical reality, serious research in the humanities is impossible without a good knowledge of Greek and Latin (as I once heard Rene Girard tell a group of horror-struck students of comparative literature). The contemporary collapse of humanistic research is due not only to driving creative people out of the field, but also to denying them the essential education. Lacking not only Milton's education, but even Shakespeare's, a Frazer or a Housman, supposing that he did slip through the dragnet and land a position somewhere, could never accomplish what those men did.

Biographers of classical scholars rarely bother to develop a professional knowledge of "that least practical of subjects." Ackerman thinks that Frazer's commentary on Ovid's *Fasti* is more important than *The Golden Bough*, while Sir Duncan wants us to believe that Murray's small volume on *Four* (later *Five*) *Stages of Greek Religion* was more significant than his three-volume critical edition of Euripides or his book on Homer. There are also errors in details. There were two great German scholars who are important for Murray's life, Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff and Eduard Fraen-

kel. Sir Duncan dates Wilamowitz's death to 1929 instead of 1931, and tells us that Fraenkel was elected Corpus Professor of Latin Literature in 1934 when he fled Hitler's Germany, although he was "a young man who had not yet established an international reputation." By 1934 Fraenkel had written the most important book in this century on Plautus and Greek New Comedy, as well as the most intelligent review that Housman's work ever received. Instead of hating Fraenkel for the frank criticism mixed with the praise in the review, Housman wrote a letter to the *Sunday Times* on Fraenkel's appointment that should have silenced forever his jealous English detractors.

All three suffered from a common Victorian malady. They lost their faith in orthodox Christianity. Housman, the conservative, did not try to force his view on others. He even wrote a hymn to be sung at his own funeral. Frazer, on the contrary, early saw a mission to disabuse the world of superstition. *The Golden Bough*, in all three editions and abridgment, is a barely disguised polemic against Christianity. Frazer first explained his view of the study of comparative religions in his obituary of his best friend, the great Semiticist Robertson Smith. The comparative method, Frazer explains, "proves that many religious doctrines and practices are based on primitive conceptions which most civilized and educated men have long agreed in abandoning as mistaken. From this it is a natural and often a probable inference that doctrines so based are false, and that practices so based are foolish." Ackerman expresses amazement that Frazer would use the death of his best friend as an excuse for religious polemic, especially since this view of the comparative method was not that of Smith himself. Frazer, however, was a man obsessed. The world of *The Golden Bough* is full of mythical heroes who died for their people and rose again to kingship and divinity. Frazer's attempt in the second edition to prove that the passion of Jesus was a misinterpretation by early Christians of a Passover ritual was one of his most catastrophic scholarly hypotheses. After it was thoroughly refuted even to his satisfaction, he reprinted it in the third edition as an example of the kind of thing that *might*

have happened. His revolt against his Scottish evangelical background would not let go of him. He could not help himself.

The same motif plays through the popular and scholarly writings of Gilbert Murray. Even his major scholarly work, *The Rise of the Greek Epic*, has as minor chord an attack on Christian scriptures. His appointment to the Regius chair kept him from delivering the Gifford Lectures on religion, but we know that he intended to explain his "profound belief in ethics and disbelief in all revelational religions." As late as 1940 he was reprinting his World War I attacks on Christianity and defense of paganism, especially Stoicism.

Frazer and Murray were important forces for convincing educated people that ethics and progress could survive without the accidental historical garb of Christianity. Then came the Great War and its aftermath. They had a chance to see how long-lasting and influential ethics were now that their religious foundations had been undermined. The effects of enlightenment were clear on all sides: England and France's cynical alliance with the brutal Russian state against Germany, Germany's reckless invasion of Belgium, the use of poisonous gas by both sides. Murray wrote British war propaganda for what he called the "Mendacity Bureau" until his hero Grey fell before Lloyd George. The collapse of prewar liberal dreams hit home, slowly but surely. Housman had never been fooled. As early as 1900 he had written to Murray, "I rather doubt if man really has much to gain by substituting peace for strife, as you and Jesus Christ recommend." He foresaw a decadence in which the burdens of peace would weigh as heavy as the travails of war. While predicting accurately the decadence of the 20's, even Housman did not foretell the atrocities that came in 1914.

By 1933 Frazer had finally realized what was happening, and he spoke out in an essay on his youthful hero Conдорcet:

The words of fiery eloquence in which Edmund Burke, the wisest of political thinkers, branded the Jacobins of his day are applicable, with hardly a change but that of names, to

the Bolsheviks of our day. In Russia of today, as in France of the day before yesterday, we see the same systematic and determined attacks on those institutions which hitherto have been regarded as the very pillars of civilized society; I mean the institutions of private property, the family, and religion.

Religion, which was false doctrine and foolish practice in 1894, is now a pillar of civilized society. In his obituary of Robertson Smith, Frazer had predicted that insofar as our ethics rest on religious or theological foundations, the unsettling of those foundations would "call for a reconsideration of the speculative basis of ethics." He had not then thought of the practical ramifications of this reconsideration. Ackerman reports the quotation I have given as "Altogether it seemed as if Europe in the 1930's resembled France in the 1790's, with only a change of names needed to make Burke's anti-Jacobin tirades directly applicable to Soviet communism." A biographer who can translate the phrase, "The words of fiery eloquence in which Edmund Burke, wisest of political

thinkers" into "Burke's anti-Jacobin tirades" is not likely to be reliable in other interpretations.

Frazer seems to have changed his mind about religion in his old age (Hyman in *The Tangled Bank* asserts that Frazer became a Christian Unitarian late in life). We know he changed it in his youth. Both events are missed by Ackerman. In his last decade, Frazer wrote a touching memoir of his parents which is all praise and nostalgia. This leads Ackerman to assert that Frazer, who came from a strongly Evangelical family, never underwent "that characteristically Victorian experience of 'deconversion,' thereby disavowing their families and their religious upbringings by identifying them with ignorance, superstition, hypocrisy, and the dead hand of the past." Ackerman's evidence is the memoir, written in the 1930's, and Frazer's habit of spending his vacations with his family in Scotland. The contrary evidence is volume after volume Frazer wrote identifying the religion of his family with ignorance, superstition, hypocrisy, and the dead hand of the past.

Murray may have changed, too. But

neither biographer really shows us their heroes' facing up to the effects of their irreligion and progressivism. It is as if a life of H.G. Wells left out his last book, *Mind at the End of Its Tether*. In the days before the Great War, the future seemed so bright. The force of liberal public opinion made "old wrong melt down, as if it were wax in the sun's rays." "O but we dreamed to mend whatever mischief seemed to afflict mankind" — superstition, hard liquor, and the German emperor. If people would only turn away from revelational religion and devote themselves to ethics and science, the world would soon be perfect. "We fed the heart on fantasies," Yeats wrote about that age. "The heart's grown brutal from the fare." Housman, too, was skeptical about the future, but even he never dreamed what nightmares were in store for a Europe that so easily gave up its Christian heritage. Gilbert Murray and J.G. Frazer learned their lessons too late. We who read their lives may understand and even forgive, but we should not pity them. I say unto you, they have their reward.



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## September Fruit

by Floyd Skloot

This autumn my daughter discovered plums. She found pineapples, figs and blackberries, learned to savor the pleasure that comes from such summer fruit as sour cherries in late September. I saw her eyes turn inward, closing round a vision of lush casaba. Soon she grew her thick auburn hair longer. She began to love the hush

of held breath as her body welcomed new tastes, risking flame tokays and tangerines. I saw there was little for me to do but stock apples and pears too. At fifteen, she felt the world become hers to harvest, welcoming each new flavor as though blessed.

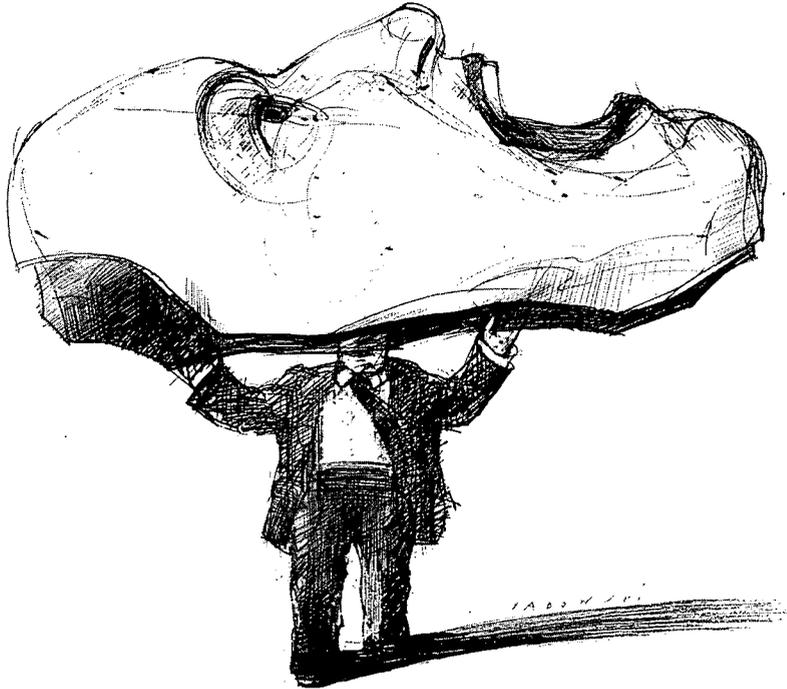
# As We Go Marching

by Samuel Francis

*“... Your tragic quality  
Required the huge delusion of some major purpose to  
produce it.*

*What, that the God of the stars needed your help?”*

—Robinson Jeffers, “Woodrow Wilson”



## The Democratic Imperative: Exporting the American Revolution

by Gregory A. Fossedal  
New York: Basic Books;  
293 pp., \$19.95

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“When a term has become so universally sanctified as ‘democracy’ now is,” wrote T.S. Eliot in 1939, “I begin to wonder whether it means anything, in meaning too many things: it has arrived perhaps at the position of a Merovingian Emperor, and wherever it is invoked, one begins to look for the Major of the Palace. . . . If anybody ever attacked democracy, I might discover what the word meant.”

If Eliot could read Gregory A. Fossedal’s *The Democratic Imperative*, he would remain as mystified today as he

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was 50 years ago. Mr. Fossedal certainly does not attack democracy, and his response to the classical criticism of it is cursory. He dismisses this criticism in two pages, quoting no less an authority than H.G. Wells to show that “Aristotle would have enjoyed the electoral methods of our modern democracies keenly.” But if Mr. Fossedal does not reveal the meaning of democracy by attacking it, neither does he clarify it by any precise definition. Not until the end of the second chapter does it occur to him that some clarification of what he has been and will be talking about throughout his book might be called for. Although he is content to relegate his definition to a long footnote, the passage merits quotation at length and consideration in depth.

In this book, the term [“democracy”] refers to a political system run by leaders chosen in periodic elections open to general participation

and free debate. These leaders serve a government of limited powers, with certain rights such as free speech, a fair trial to those accused of serious crimes, and so on, the denial of which is beyond the state’s reach. It is assumed that with those rights intact, voters will be able to choose the optimal arrangements for, say, economic freedom.

This crucial footnote continues for most of the page with further distinctions and elaborations, but neither there nor elsewhere does Mr. Fossedal tell us what certain key elements of his definition mean. How “general” does participation have to be before a nondemocratic system becomes democratic? What are “free debate,” “free speech,” and a “fair trial”? What is “and so on”? The content and meaning of such terms are so variously interpreted in the United States and other countries that