

Making Space for the Incisive but Idiosyncratic: A Biography of Lord Raglan

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Fitzroy Richard Somerset, the 4th Baron Raglan (1885–1964), was actively engaged in anthropological debate from the 1930s to the 1960s. The last of the gentleman scholars in anthropology Raglan, who never held a university post yet became the President of the Royal Anthropological Institute (RAI) in the 1950s, consistently transcended any academic/popular divide.

For anthropologists who regard their subject in conventional historiographic terms, Raglan can be seen as a mere transitional figure, an amateur who achieved prominence at the very time others were striving to professionalise their scholastic pursuit. This is an impoverishing view from an interested position. Raglan, an anthropologist of quixotic profundity, has been disregarded because he spent much effort promoting with vigour a side-lined paradigm. This interested exclusion shunts out of sight the suggestive contributions he did make. It is true he was an unrepentant diffusionist in times of structural-functionalist hegemony, but there is more to the man than that.

As a young officer, Raglan was posted to the Sudan, then Transjordan. He liked to spend time amongst the peoples whose lives he oversaw. An accomplished linguist, he learnt the languages of the areas he nominally managed. On his father's death in 1922, he resigned from the Army and established himself at the family seat in Monmouth, southeast Wales. Beyond Monmouth, Raglan became popularly known as an anthropologist and witty polemicist.

In the early 1920s Charles Seligman, who had seen an article by Raglan in *Sudanese Notes and Records*, suggested he join the Royal Anthropological Institute (RAI). Raglan did, then put himself through a self-directed course in the subject. Within ten years he was elected President of Section H (Anthropology) of the British Association for the Advancement of Science. After the war he became President of the Folklore Society (1945–47), and then of the RAI (1955–58).

Raglan's theoretical approach was a variable blend of ritualism, diffusionism, and neo-Frazerianism, combined with a remarkably developed sense, for his time, of the structuring power of the symbolic. Like the hyperdiffusionism then espoused by Grafton Elliot Smith and William Perry at University College London, Raglan believed that civilization arose, benefitting all humankind, in one specific place and time. Unlike them, he did not indulge in Egyptocentricity, but claimed Sumeria c.4000 BC was the fount of today's developed world. A further difference was Raglan's relative lack of interest in the geographic details of cultural transmission. He was usually far more concerned with varieties of social organisation, especially its cosmological dimensions. For him, the most acceptable mode for explaining social phenomena was the social, supplemented by a speculative historicism.

Heroic origins: a survey of Lord Raglan's work

The peculiarity of Lord Raglan's anthropological thought is best understood through a quick survey of his prolific production, a succession of books that reveal a variety of interests – connected, however, in most unpredicted ways. Starting with *Jocasta's Crime* (Raglan 1933a), Raglan asked why Jocasta, pregnant by Oedipus, fears cosmic, not congenital consequences: the plague she has brought on Thebes. Why, he asks, should a personal transgression lead to general disaster? Dismissing the role of instinct or analogy from animal behaviour, Raglan notes the near-universality of the incest taboo, magical prohibitions, and exogamy among 'savage societies'. He thus argues the latter two legitimate the present-day upholding of the taboo, while its historical justification is provided by creation myths, themselves based on creation rituals, many of which have similar internal structures.

His most successful anthropological book, *The Hero* (Raglan 1936), is a comparative survey of European legends and tales of exemplars. Contrary to the widespread assumption that old stories are 'historical unless ... proved fictitious', he argues an opposite thesis. On the basis of his survey, he elucidates twenty-two motifs typical of heroic figures, then applies his list to twenty-one heroic lives, from Classical, Old Testament, Javanese, Nilotic, Nordic, Celtic, and English folkloric sources. In each case the chosen character exhibits a majority of the motifs. In other words, the hero is a polythetic concept, i.e. a broad set of criteria, where no particular criterion is necessary or sufficient; any example of the concept must simply manifest a certain minimal number of the criteria (Needham 1975). For Raglan, the important consequence is that heroic tales should be regarded as above all structured according to a loose but common narrative: this tells more about modes of thought than historical realities (Raglan 1936). The corollary is that all these heroes are mythical.

In his next book, *How came Civilization?* (Raglan 1939), he examines the archaeological and ethnographic evidence for the geohistorical spread of key items of civilization. Confounding contemporary opinions by exposing their fragile presumptions, he argues their probable ritualistic origin: e.g. animals were first domesticated for sacrifice; the first use of the plough was to symbolically fertilise the soil. Then in *Death and Rebirth* (Raglan 1945), Raglan argues that initiations, coronations, marriages, and funerals are all variants of the same ceremony: in each the central figure undergoes symbolic death and rebirth. These reflections paved the way to a more ambitious project. Echoing the grandiose titles of late 19th century, he published in 1949 *The Origins of Religion* (Raglan 1949), he contends that a religion is an organisation for the performance of symbolic activities, i.e. rites. The object of rites is to secure the life and prosperity of the members of the religion, first in this world, later in the next one. Therefore religious innovators were not proto-theologians; they did not win over others by saying, 'This is what I think; it may contain an element of truth' but rather, 'Do what I tell you and you will be rewarded'.

His final work, published short before his death, is *The Temple and the House* (Raglan 1964), where he argues that houses derive historically from palaces, in turn derived from temples, where the most important rite of early religion was held: the annual marriage of the Earth and the Sky, performed to ensure prosperity and fertility.

An unrepentant quixotic who fell afoul of academic fashion

In the eyes of the professionalisers, Raglan championed an increasingly unfashionable approach. Moreover he did so energetically and in an uncompromising manner. His copious book reviews in and letters to *Man* are often bold in tone and unsparing in criticism. He repeatedly chides colleagues for shoddy scholarship, logical inconsistencies, and poorly grounded speculation.

Within the UK, and beyond academia, assessment of Raglan's anthropological work was much more positive. Generally, reviewers of his books appreciated his cross-cultural ability to remind readers how arbitrary English customs of the day were; they valued his crisp delivery, sly asides, impatience with sloppy thinking, and fearless approach to big themes. As one renowned writer admonished Raglan, 'I read (*Jocasta's crime*) with attention, edification, delight—and infuriation. There are times when it seems to me you are the most wilfully wrongheaded anthropologist I know, a singular if bad eminence' (Shanks to Raglan, 5 vi 1951, 2. GA).

During his lifetime, assessment of Raglan's work, within academic anthropology and beyond, was variable. In the years following his death the British anthropologists who wrote the history of their discipline were much more uniform in opinion about the diffusionism he espoused. They thought it a mistake.

The postwar neo-Durkheimians were so ready to denigrate diffusionism because it clashed with their structural-functionalist portrayal of societies as coherent wholes coasting in an ethnographic present. Societal integrity was valued, cultural borrowing was not. History was a complicating factor they usually wished to do without. In this constraining context, Raglan's sustained latter-day defence of diffusionist development and appeals for the incorporation of historical dimensions into anthropological studies were unwanted. As an independent scholar, he had the freedom 'to voice muted discontents more widely felt within the profession at large' (Vincent 1994: 257). However, as an amateur in an increasingly professionalised university context, he had no power to change, only to irritate.

It is relatively easy to demonstrate this postwar attitude of methodological dismissiveness is as misrepresentative as it is interested. From about 1910 to 1930 diffusionists had in fact enjoyed an extended popularity, their fundamental concerns about migration and culture contact being shared by many of their anthropology contemporaries. Moreover, during this interwar period, diffusionism was also popular beyond the academy, as much of its protagonists' writings were aimed at a general readership, who 'responded enthusiastically' (Kuklick 1991: 12).

Furthermore, within British academic anthropology of the postwar period, diffusionism managed to live on, albeit in a minor key and shorn of its excesses. University College London (UCL) still acted by default as the academic homebase for British diffusionism.

Posthumous destiny

Diffusionism did not stutter into inactivity in the late 1930s, despite what some wish to claim. It remained a live anthropological concern, though one outside the UK mainstream, through to contemporary times, while the recent emergence of globalisation theory has led to the beginning of its reappraisal and some initial questioning of postwar dismissiveness.

Raglan may be viewed as a victim of this divisive process, as one made to suffer the common fate of unfashionable radicals: more lampooned than lauded, more dismissed than discussed. Too often, his desire to be bold, to not appear cowardly, was the cause of his downfall. The lord wanted to cut a dash. Instead he was usually just cut, marginalised as a late stalwart of a noble stereotype, the English eccentric. Given his sustained work in the symbolic and spiritual dimensions of social life, it is ironic this clever but idiosyncratic scholar is today best remembered by religious sceptics, who exploit his social approach to ritual as grist to the atheist mill.

If, in mid-century Britain, the poet and novelist Robert Graves can be regarded as the greatest populariser of neo-Frazerian anthropology (MacClancy 2013: 110–134), then Raglan was his diffusionist counterpart. Their example reminds us how much work is done in the name of our discipline beyond its academically defined borders.

Further, as some were well aware, Raglan's defiant defence of diffusionism could mask his genuinely pioneering, protostructuralist work: the symbolic equation linking incest to exogamy; the structure of mythical-hero narratives; the symbolic logic common to a variety of rites, and to housing structures; the organizing role of symbolism in religious rites. In these senses, Raglan's protostructuralist equivalences strove to keep symbolic concerns to the fore at a time when neo-Durkheimians concentrated on elucidating social structures.

Needham knew Raglan personally, because he was the literary executor of Maurice Hocart, whose intellectual style he shared, in many ways. Needham, then looking for precursors of structuralist concerns, lauded Hocart's work. Introducing a reissue of Hocart's *Kings and councillors* (Hocart 1936), Needham decried the structural-functionalists' unfair shunting of diffusionism into 'a limbo of unregenerate error' (Needham 1970: lxviii). Similarly, at Cambridge, Edmund Leach, as renowned as Needham for his individual approach, greatly appreciated the imaginative acuity of Raglan's symbolic equations. Leach thought colleagues might class *The temple and the house* a display 'of amateurism and of senility'; he considered it 'very shrewd'. For him, the more hidebound had been too distracted by Raglan's quixotic manner to perceive his 'element of true genius' (Leach 1965; 1982: 209).

Raglan may also be regarded as an upholder of fundamental concerns in anthropology. Needham, for one, thought Raglan an exemplar of what anthropologists should be doing: not just comprehending alien categories, but subjecting our own categories to 'a comparative and sceptical appraisal' as well (Needham 1964).

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