

# NATURE

## SUPPLEMENT

Vol. 145

SATURDAY, MARCH 30, 1940

No. 3674

### SHORT REVIEWS

#### ANTHROPOLOGY OF ARCHAEOLOGY

##### Aboriginal Woman, Sacred and Profane

By Dr. Phyllis M. Kaberry. Pp. xxxii+294+8 plates. (London: George Routledge & Sons, Ltd., 1939.) 15s. net.

**D**R. KABERRY'S observations among the aborigines of north-west Australia, of which certain of the results are given in this volume, mark a new departure in the study of the primitive peoples of that continent. While it is no new thing for women to enter the field of anthropological investigation with the specific object of illuminating the sphere of the woman among backward people—that is a matter of the anthropological history of more than a generation—and Australian records include the names of more than one notable woman observer, Dr. Kaberry has approached the problem of the tribal woman from what in Australia is a new point of view. Hitherto, both in form and content, tribal life and organization have been assumed tacitly to be mainly the province of the male members of the group, with the female as an appendage or adjunct of the male, performing, it is true, certain functions essential to the continuance of the group and to the life of the individual, but otherwise of little significance. Here in Dr. Kaberry's detailed record of the results of observations carried out among various tribes in 1934 and 1935–36 is set out the evidence of how far the female members can be regarded as socially individuals, and how far the functions attributable to them pass beyond the 'profane' in tribal life and enter into the 'sacred' province, in which the male has hitherto monopolized the centre of the picture in anthropological investigation.

If it be said that the results of Dr. Kaberry's investigations enlarge considerably the conception of woman's status and function in the Australian tribe, that need be no matter for surprise, at least for many who have regarded previous records from this aspect with some reserve. She has, however, gone considerably beyond most of her predecessors by transcending the form of tribal institutions and extending her

inquiry to 'cases'—in other words, by finding out how far these institutions work, how far they are elastic, so as to admit alternative modes of behaviour, and how far they are flouted by the conduct of individuals. As a result, the aboriginal woman emerges not merely as an anthropological specimen, but also as a human being and an individual—essentially of the feminine order.

##### Herbert Spencer Betrayed

With some account of the repudiation of the "Descriptive Sociology" by his Trustees. By Alfred W. Tillett. Pp. x+68. (London: P. S. King & Son, Ltd., 1939.) 4s. 6d. net.

**M**R. TILLETT vigorously attacks the trustees of Herbert Spencer's will on the grounds: (1) that while the terms of the will required his estate to be applied to completing the publication of "Descriptive Sociology", which was uncompleted on Spencer's death, they acted *ultra vires* in publishing Dr. Rumney's "Herbert Spencer, Sociologist", in which Spencer as philosopher and man is vilified; and (2) that they determined the Trust and distributed the balance of the fund among the residuary legatees before the work, for which the trust was created, had been completed.

Mr. Tillett, though advised to the contrary, still hopes that it will be possible to obtain a judicial pronouncement on the position he has taken up; and it is therefore undesirable to express any opinion here, even if the case were not one involving difficulties of interpretation, legal and other. There is no doubt that in such matters open accusation is better than underground insinuation. It may be pointed out, however, that the trustees had exercised every care in becoming discharged of their trust. Not only had the Court already varied the terms of the will to meet changed conditions, but also the opinion of the Attorney General was sought before the trustees took final action. With the legal position of the trustees thus clarified, in view of recent development in sociological studies, further expenditure in this direction seemed to be largely waste.