

## BOOK REVIEWS

### GENERAL

BRANDEWIE, ERNEST. *When Giants Walked the Earth: The Life and Times of Wilhelm Schmidt SVD*. Studia Instituti Anthropos 44. Fribourg, Switzerland: University Press, 1990. 357 pages. Bibliography, index. Paper. ISBN 3-7278-0712-1; ISSN 0570-3085.

Father Wilhelm Schmidt (1868-1954) is one of those legendary figures in the history of anthropology, known by name but rarely read by students today. Few know more of him than that he was a representative of the *Kulturkreislehre* and the advocate of *Urmonotheismus*. Yet he is one of the giants of this discipline, worthy on several counts of serious attention and reassessment. The present book by Ernest Brandewie of Indiana University is actually his third portrayal of the life and works of Wilhelm Schmidt (see BRANDEWIE 1982, 1983). This time the focus is, as the subtitle indicates, on the biographical facts of Schmidt's life.

Born into a simple worker's family in Hörde, now part of Dortmund in Westphalia, Germany, Wilhelm Schmidt entered the Catholic seminary in Steyl (The Netherlands), which later became the home of the Catholic Order of the Divine Word (*Societas Verbi Divini*). A year after his ordination in 1892 he was sent to the University of Berlin, where he studied Semitic languages and religions for three semesters. He then moved to the Missionary Seminary of St Gabriel in Mödling, near Vienna, where he spent the most productive years of his life, from 1895 to 1938. Brandewie's book provides us with abundant information regarding his conservative political stance (including his anti-Semitism) and his close contacts with Karl, the last Kaiser of the Hapsburg dynasty, and with Pope Pius XII. After the annexation of Austria by Nazi Germany he moved to Fribourg, Switzerland, relocating also the Anthropos Institute founded by him. He became a professor at the University of Fribourg, while remaining *Privatdozent* at the University of Vienna, a position he had held since 1921. He died in 1954 in Fribourg.

Besides numerous ethnological and linguistic publications such as *Der Ursprung der Gottesidee* in twelve volumes (1912-55), *Völker und Kulturen* (1924), and *Die Sprachfamilien und Sprachenkreise der Erde* (1926), his prodigious efforts resulted in the establishment of several notable academic institutions: *Anthropos*, an international journal for ethnology and linguistics (1906), the Lateran Museum for Missionology and Ethnology in Rome (1927), and the Anthropos Institute (1932). He also urged the University of Vienna to found a chair of ethnology, which was established in 1928 with his student Father Wilhelm Koppers as its first holder. Another project, not realized, was the foundation of a Catholic university in Salzburg.

In view of his great contributions, the difficulties of Schmidt's last days in Fribourg are all the more unfortunate. Schmidt was harshly treated by Fritz Bornemann, the director of the Anthropos Institute at the time and later his literary executor, and Arnold Burgmann, the rector of the House in Froideville, Fribourg. Bornemann first

took over the editorship of *Anthropos* from Schmidt in 1949, and a year later he assumed the post of Director of the Institute. The situation grew steadily worse:

Schmidt was very hurt by what was going on around him in Froideville. He was losing control of the journal: Bornemann was already going behind his back, as he saw it, and was trying to discredit him among his peers. He reacts in an *ad hominem* manner, not addressing the points Bornemann was making about culture circles, but lashing out and ridiculing his lack of ability to do research. This was vintage Schmidt, as we have so often seen. One can suspect, with good reason, that Schmidt was not actually as convinced of the total validity of culture circles as one might gather from these statements. (300)

Burgmann made things worse by issuing regulations that progressively deprived Schmidt of his pleasures and freedoms: the harmonium, the playing of which was one of his few relaxations, was removed, and Schmidt was no longer allowed to meet Fräulein Jirka, his niece-secretary, outside of the House or even at the clinic. Later she was banned from visiting him in the House, and only contact by mail was permitted. Schmidt himself was allowed free movement only in the House of Froideville and the park above the House.

Although I do not condone Bornemann's and Burgmann's ill-treatment of Schmidt, their behavior is in many ways understandable. As Brandewie writes, "Many of the difficulties Schmidt had with the people he worked with in the Institute were the result, no doubt, of his own doing" (310). Schmidt's strong personality and stubborn attitude certainly generated frustration and resentment among many of his confreres and students. I might cite an example not mentioned by the author. Schmidt did not tolerate any activity of the younger generation critical of his method and theory. Thus he suppressed the Viennese Study Group for African Culture History (WAFAK) in the early 1930s, and the group finally dissolved (HIRSCHBERG 1977). Such human frailties, however, must not conceal the fact that he was a giant in the history of ethnology. Brandewie's new book helps us understand Schmidt's life and personality against the background of the turbulent social history of Europe. It might be noted in this connection that Hans Fischer, in his new book on German ethnology in the Nazi age, also discusses the Catholic anti-Semitism of Schmidt in a context different from the present book (FISCHER 1990, 54-63).

In conclusion, I hope that the present book will stimulate further investigation of the history and influence of German historical ethnology in general, and of Father Wilhelm Schmidt in particular.

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