

**T O T E M S A N D
T E A C H E R S**

**Key Figures in the
History of Anthropology**

Second Edition

**Edited by
SYDEL SILVERMAN**



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MARGARET MEAD

Rhoda Metraux

Sydel Silverman



Margaret Mead with her signature walking stick at a Burg Warstenstein conference, 1973. Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, Inc.

No anthropologist, with the possible exception of Franz Boas in his day, has had a more prominent place in public life—and has been more identified with anthropology in the public image—than Margaret Mead. A student of Boas, a younger colleague of Ruth Benedict, and a contemporary of several figures in this book who received their Ph.D.s around the same time as she did (Leslie White and Robert Redfield at Chicago, Julian Steward at Berkeley, Raymond Firth at the London School of Economics, and Alexander Lesser at Columbia), Mead's life spanned much of the history of anthropology in the twentieth century.

Mead was born the year that Alfred Kroeber completed his studies under Boas and left for California, just at the time that the American Anthropological Association (AAA) was created. When she died in 1978, her discipline was marking a break with its past in several waves of “reinventions.” First, in the early 1970s, as part of the upheavals engendered by the Vietnam War, the feminist movement, and the entry of new minority and indigenous voices into the academy, there was a critical thrust demanding a more political and socially responsive anthropology (e.g., Hymes 1969; Asad 1973). Then, beginning in the late 1970s and culminating in the 1980s, from the ranks of interpretive anthropology (see Geertz 1973) and an emergent postmodernism, there came a questioning of the entire ethnographic enterprise (Marcus and Fischer 1986; Clifford and Marcus 1986). At about the same time, a reassertion of biological determinism in the sciences and in public discourse yielded a version of neo-Darwinism in anthropology. Mead was (or

would have been, had she lived longer) uncomfortable with, if not deeply opposed to, each of these developments.

A towering figure among her anthropological colleagues, the many scientists and intellectuals from other fields with whom she collaborated, and the larger American public, Mead was also a target of much criticism. Many anthropologists considered her not to have been a serious scholar because of her simplified translations of anthropology to her public audiences, although those same anthropologists welcomed the messages she carried and the renown that she brought to their discipline. Others—mostly outside of academia but also within it—blamed her for what they saw as her pernicious influence on society. Neither charge was entirely fair: She was an accomplished ethnographer who produced an enormous corpus of scholarly writing on her research, and her public impact was hardly as draconian as purported. New controversies swirled around her after her death, until a more balanced picture of her contributions came into play as the centennial of her death was marked.

In this chapter, Margaret Mead is considered from two perspectives. A biographical sketch by her close friend and collaborator, Rhoda Metraux, written for a special issue of the *American Anthropologist* shortly after Mead's death, is reprinted here.¹ It is followed by a retrospective view of Mead by the editor of this volume, which was originally presented to a mixed audience of anthropologists, other academics, and the general public in conjunction with the Mead centenary.² This piece, written by one who knew Mead but was not close to her, reflects upon the significance of her contributions for anthropologists, and others, today.



Thinking back over her life, Margaret Mead wrote:

I went to Samoa—as, later, I went to the other societies on which I have worked—to find out more about human beings, human beings like ourselves in everything except their culture. . . . But how many social scientists are there, today, who are trying to think out ways in which primitive peoples, where they still exist, can become our partners and co-workers in the search for knowledge that may, in the end, save their children and ours? (1972: 293–94)

Was this an optimist's question—or challenge? Margaret Mead had the gift of confidence. She deeply believed that we, human beings, have the capacity and the cultural expectations necessary to keep our human enterprise going, even now when we have also the technical power to destroy ourselves and the world. Very early she committed herself—with zest and humor, imagination

and respect for hard facts, and above all continuing disciplined work—to the task of adding to the necessary knowledge and, somewhat later, of persuading other people, at every level, to act on behalf of this enterprise. She had confidence and very few illusions, an almost uncanny combination. It won her enormous admiring audiences—and many detractors.

In general, her purposes were direct and readily intelligible. But her enjoyment of diversity was so great, her fund of observations so rich, and her network of professional and personal relations so densely woven that it is very difficult to present a brief biographical statement that mirrors the reality. This essay serves to remind us of sequences.

The plain facts of Mead's life are familiar. Her audiences, her colleagues, her friends, her students, her children, and her informants in the field, as they came to know her, all delighted in her accounts of her childhood, her anecdotes of other times and places. Yet she never lived in the past. She drew on her own life as a precious resource. She used her past to illuminate the present, for herself and others, and in this way to light up the future—the possible future.

Her significant memory images never dulled. They remained lively and precise, so that certain ones are now as present to me—a longtime listener—as are my own eidetic images. This precise access to her life experiences was extraordinarily immediate and free flowing, combining always in new ways, and her easy movement through time gave many people the curious impression that she crossed generation lines and belonged simultaneously (for some) to the youngest and (to others) to the oldest living generation. However, she placed herself unequivocally within her own generation, whose lives, spanning the twentieth century, have been subjected to almost unequalled change and the necessity for drastic adaptation. Although, over time, she spoke to a great many people very frankly about a great many things, a kind of mythology is already beginning to take over. This is perhaps inevitable. But we can try to keep the record straight.

Margaret Mead was born on December 16, 1901, the eldest child of Emily Fogg and Edward Sherwood Mead. All her life she enjoyed knowing that she was the first infant delivered in a new, modern hospital in Philadelphia. Richard, her brother, was born in 1904; though he was paired with her, he was frail and accident-prone—not the companion she had hoped for. Katherine, the next child, died in infancy in 1906. So there was a real gap between the elder and the younger living children, Elizabeth, born in 1909, and Priscilla, born in 1911.

Margaret Mead was brought up in a household of educators. Emily Mead had been a teacher before her marriage and, while Margaret was a small child, studied Italian immigrant families in Hammonton, New Jersey, in preparation for a master's degree in sociology; Margaret carried the study a step further in her own master's thesis in psychology (1924). Edward Mead was a professor at the Wharton School of Finance and Commerce of the University of Pennsylvania, and very early introduced his daughter to academia in all its complexity and narrow politics. But the most important person in her early life was her father's

mother, Martha Ramsay Mead, who had long been a widow and lived in her son's home from the time of his marriage until her death in 1927. She had been a teacher and a school principal and had progressive, if somewhat unusual, ideas about the education of small children.

Grandma was Margaret's first and, until she went to Barnard, probably her only important teacher. As she explained, "between the ages of five and seventeen I spent two years in kindergarten, one year—but only half-days—in the fourth grade and six years in high school" (1972: 71). At home she learned algebra, before arithmetic, and botany in the fields around the farm where the family lived, at least part of the year, in Holicong, Bucks County, Pennsylvania, from 1911. She also learned always to finish a task and, when only ten years old, to take adult responsibility for her small sisters when her mother was away from home due to illness. Grandma became her conscience, but a conscience in which trust was matched with trust. She was also at the center of Margaret's audience when, a young field-worker, Margaret wrote letters home from Samoa; she said that her grandmother was "the one person whom I wanted most to understand what my work was about and the one it would be hardest to convince that I had chosen well in becoming an anthropologist" (1977: 8).

Early in her childhood Margaret discovered a need for privacy—to be herself and alone. In every house to which the family moved, she found herself an upstairs room, often an attic, of which her museum office—in the sixth-floor storage area of the southwest tower—was a replica. Much later, trains and planes, hotel rooms, and the quiet hours before dawn gave her the privacy that meant a kind of freedom.

In the same period, when she was eleven, she began her deeply religious life within the formal beauty of the Protestant Episcopal Church. She chose her own godmothers and was baptized in the old church in Holicong, where she was later married to Luther Cressman; as she wished, she is now buried in the churchyard. Much later she worked devotedly on committees of the World Council of Churches. But although she spoke and wrote on topics related to religion, all her life her faith was implicit and part of the privacy she cherished and guarded.

Her father teased her painfully about her religious decision. In spite of this she felt that the Mead children were treated as persons with the full right to make their own choices. In her family the price of autonomy was not rebellion but finding a way. As an adult, Margaret had almost no tolerance for arbitrary restrictions of autonomy. Yet she had little empathy with rebellion. There had to be another way.

Her first college, DePauw, was not of her choosing, and she was totally unprepared for the treatment meted out to her as an outsider, an Easterner, who did not fit in any way into the style and prejudices of sorority life. It was her

first, her only real, rejection, something she never forgot or forgave. And she made one important discovery—how difficult it is in our society to organize those who have in common only the fact of rejection.

The following year she transferred to Barnard College, and, one may well say, the die was cast. At Barnard, she lived in a dormitory apartment with a group of sophisticated and talented young women, who shared the sense of excitement and expectancy—the exhilaration—of the 1920s. It was her first young-adult taste of friendship and intimacy by choice within a group.

In college Mead weighed the possibilities of half a dozen careers. Out of a curious modesty she made the choice for which she was most eminently suited. Describing her reasoning, she wrote: "I wanted to make a contribution. It seemed to me then—as it still does—that science is an activity in which . . . any individual, by finding his own level, can make a true contribution. So I chose science—and to me that meant one of the social sciences. My problem then was which of the social sciences?" (1972: 111).

Her first choice was psychology. But, even while she was writing her master's essay, she had made her final choice of anthropology. She herself has described how she came to make that choice—through her growing friendship with Ruth Benedict and the enthusiasm Franz Boas roused.

When Benedict said to her that "Professor Boas and I have nothing to offer but an opportunity to do work that matters" (quoted in Mead 1972: 114), she saw that as a responsibility that could not be avoided. Long ago she had learned to take responsibility, and there it was—for her to accept and carry out. Equally important, I believe, is the fact that Boas valued women highly, recognized talent where he saw it, and backed choices made out of strength. Mead remembered that Boas spent time with his less talented students, so the more talented had to work on their own; she remembered his opposition to her initial plan to work in the remote, isolated Tuamotu Archipelago, but he backed her more modest demand to go to American Samoa against those who thought she was too frail to go anywhere in the field. He feared she might break down not if she went into the field but if she were prevented from doing the work she wanted to do (1959: 288).

So, in 1925, when she had completed her graduate training and had written a library dissertation, *An Inquiry into the Question of Cultural Stability in Polynesia* (1928a), she set out for Samoa—the only field trip in her life in which she worked as an anthropologist alone. Her voluminous letters home kept her in balance, but when she left Samoa her need for intellectual companionship was almost overwhelming.

I have given a disproportionate amount of space to an account of Mead's early years because she herself suggested the themes that connected the early to the later years of her life. Certainly, there is congruence between her view of herself as a child and as a mature woman. From time to time, men

in particular have emphasized her aggressiveness, as they saw it. Yet she was not an aggressive woman. She demanded much of others, as she demanded much of herself. But she had little patience with mistaken estimates of one's own capacities.

Margaret Mead herself felt that there was a change point in her life in the years immediately following World War II. In fact, one may discern not two but four phases in her professional life. What was begun in one continues in those that follow; what changes is the emphasis as experience and events alter the choices that can—or must—be made. When the atomic bomb burst over Hiroshima, Mead set aside an unfinished manuscript on the postwar world. We regret the loss. But she felt the world had changed: "We had entered a new age" (1972: 271).

The first phase is *the period between 1925 and 1939*—the period of intense preoccupation with fieldwork. In the brief span of fourteen years, she made five field trips and studied eight peoples: Samoa (1925–1926), where she worked alone but lived with an American naval family, on Tau; Manus (1928–1929), with her second husband, Reo Fortune; Omaha (summer 1930), with Reo Fortune; New Guinea—Arapesh, Mundugumor, and Tchambuli (1931–1933)—with Reo Fortune; Bali (1936–1938, 1939) and New Guinea—the Iatmul of Tambunam (1938)—with her third husband, Gregory Bateson. In between she worked with collections at the American Museum of Natural History, where she was assistant curator of ethnology, and visited museums in Europe to see the old and famous collections in her Pacific area. As a scholar, she achieved a brilliant mastery of the areas she had chosen for her own and published nine major monographs and books (and uncounted articles) on her research and fieldwork. From the beginning she worked in a new and untried field of anthropology that has since been known, generally, as "culture-and-personality." Together with Bateson, she made a dramatic change in methodology through the use of photography. And from working alone and then with one other fieldworker in a close collaboration, she and Gregory developed working relationships with other fieldworkers, having different talents and skills, who were also engaged in research in Bali.

The second phase includes *the period between 1939 and perhaps 1948*, when, opening the way for so many of us, she applied her knowledge to the very specific applied problems of the war and post-war years in the United States and, increasingly, abroad. As executive secretary of the Committee on Food Habits, National Research Council, she had already grasped how essential interdisciplinary thinking was in approaching these problems, and she succeeded in turning her distinguished and diverse committee into a productive working group that drew on still other research. She continued to publish—an innovative study of Bali, with Bateson (Bateson and Mead 1942); her own first essay on American culture (1965 [1942]); and a number of articles on contemporary problems. Later, in the 1960s, she came to feel that those publications had not

reached a younger audience now come of age, and she agreed to republish a set of papers as *Anthropology: A Human Science* (1964).

In the preface of this volume she wrote: "We have reached a period in history in which every discipline is needed . . . in our attempt to deal responsibly with an endangered world" (1964: iv). She was certainly not alone in reaching this conclusion in the war and postwar years, during which interdisciplinary work became a necessity and, briefly, a fashion. But few succeeded in the venture as did those who worked with Mead at this time. During a third phase, more or less *between 1948 and 1953*, we experimented with an open, though carefully controlled, form of interdisciplinary research in Columbia University Research in Contemporary Cultures, for which Benedict had obtained the initial grant from the Office of Naval Research. Its realization, after Benedict's death in 1948, depended in large measure on Mead's coordinating abilities. This was the first in a series of projects that grew out of the applied work on contemporary cultures during the war and became variously known as studies of culture at a distance and studies of national culture or national character. The initial study was comparative in its total design, as research was carried out simultaneously on seven cultures (Mead and Metraux 1953; Mead and Wolfenstein 1955).

It is difficult to say, even now, just why this form of research was so very short-lived, but the willingness of anthropologists and others to take on further projects died away, funds dried up, and the demand for the kind of information by governments dropped off more or less simultaneously.

Finally, *the twenty-five years between 1953 and 1978* became a medley in which all of Mead's talents and interests were intricately interrelated. They were her principal teaching years in the most diverse settings. They were the years during which she became a renowned public speaker with audiences the world over; the years during which she took part in high-level discussion and study groups, served on innumerable committees and commissions, and held high office in scientific organizations; the years during which she finally became a full curator at the museum (in 1964); the years during which she received twenty-seven honorary degrees as well as many awards.

In these years Mead looked for a publishing medium through which an anthropological approach to contemporary problems might reach a very wide audience. It was suggested that she write a newspaper column somewhat like that written by Eleanor Roosevelt. The idea did not appeal to her; these columns would necessarily be very brief and would require an unremitting volume of daily research. Somewhat later, following a very successful interview with Margaret Truman in *Redbook*, she was invited to contribute a monthly column to that magazine, a publishing relationship that continued for seventeen years.

What was more significant in her own eyes was the continuation of her innovative scientific work. In 1953 she returned to Manus, together with

Theodore Schwartz and his wife, now Lenora Foerstal, to undertake recording the immense changes that began during the war and have continued as the Manus people have made their way into the contemporary world. Thereafter she returned five times—in a continuing effort to grasp the intricate process of change—to follow research that was being done by others.

In 1967 and again in 1971, she traveled with me to Tambunan, on the Sepik River, where she had worked with Bateson in 1938, in order to bridge the years and help me initiate another study of the process of change in a very different setting. In 1957 and 1977 she made return trips to Bali, and in 1973 she spent some weeks with a group of Mountain Arapesh who had been scattered and were recently reunited in an experimental oil-palm resettlement on New Britain. From one point of view, these visits were much too short for any coordinated work. But in each situation, with her capacity for intense observation and her prodigious memory, there were details that only she could illuminate for others about past and present.

During these years, as well, Mead and a very young team that she brought together herself worked on preparation of the hall she had been brought to the museum to organize when she came, in 1926. The Hall of the Peoples of the Pacific finally opened in May 1971. By 1975, owing to the reorganization of museum space, the hall was closed; she herself approved the plans for the new hall. [Ed. note: the hall opened in 1984.]

In 1978, as her strength ebbed, Margaret made an immense and valiant effort to meet her obligations; she even dreamed of traveling to Manus once more. It was too late. But, characteristically, her last conversation was related to fieldwork. Five nights before her death she began to plan how we would spend the coming winter analyzing Bateson's Iatmul films in great detail. Her mind moved as swiftly and played as lightly with ideas as on the morning, long ago, when we first talked in her office.

She died quietly on the early morning of November 15.

RHODA METRAUX



It is fitting that we commemorate the centenary of Margaret Mead's birth, in view of her larger-than-life presence in anthropology and in American society for over fifty years. But it does not serve us to rewrite her life and work in celebratory terms. What I wish to do, rather, is to think back on the trajectory that Mead followed, from her first foray to Samoa in 1925 at the age of twenty-three until her death in 1978, and to ask what messages we may draw from it

today. I propose to focus on three aspects of Mead's career: her championing of culture as an antidote to biological determinism and American ethnocentrism, drawing especially on her studies of seven cultures in Oceania; her pioneering of new approaches in anthropology and her visions of its future; and her advocacy of a public role for anthropology, a role that she assumed as her personal mantle.

To understand Mead's career, it is necessary to go back to Franz Boas, her mentor, who established the department at Columbia at about the time that Mead was born. As Boas struggled against the prevailing theorizing of his day, which viewed primitive cultures in terms of evolutionary schemes, and against a typological and racialist tradition in physical anthropology, he countered against these the notions of *culture* as an independent realm, separate from race (and from language), and of *cultures* as historically situated contexts for learned human behavior. These concerns, of course, had political implications, and Boas brought his views into the public arena. For example, his own study of the bodily changes in the children of immigrants, in comparison to their parents (1911a), spoke directly to the capacity of the then-surgling numbers of immigrants to the United States to become assimilated Americans, and he used his research to challenge anti-immigration policies. Boas imbued in his students a belief in the importance of their anthropological expertise and the necessity of communicating it to the public. This project took on new urgency with the rise of Nazism in the 1930s and the undiminished destructive force of American-style racism, even as national energies focused on World War II.

Eric Wolf (1969b), in attempting to relate major phases in the history of American anthropology to periods in the development of American society, labeled the years from the last decade of the nineteenth century to the onset of World War II as a period of (intermittent) liberal reform in the United States. The dominant themes of this period were an assertion of the claims of society as a whole against the rights of the untrammelled individualistic entrepreneur and a sponsorship of the mobility of groups not hitherto represented in the social and political arena. The corresponding emphasis in anthropology was on cultural plurality and relativity, human malleability, and a view of individual cultures as organic wholes and moral paradigms. Boas, of course, was the main spokesman of this kind of anthropology, which had its manifestation first in historical particularism and then in the culture-and-personality schools that came to the fore in the 1930s.

Boas's research program for his discipline emphasized empirical study of the diverse cultures of the world, especially through fieldwork. His approach encompassed both historical strategies, which began with methods for tracing culture traits but increasingly called attention to the internal patterning of

cultures, and psychological interests in the individual in culture. These two aspects also represented an epistemological contrast: between the historical and the scientific. Although Boas himself combined and shifted between these aspects, the generation of his students after World War I emphasized the second.

Mead was part of that second generation. Boas seems to have mellowed by that time. This cohort of his students included a substantial number of women (some of them beginning as his secretary); he chose their research topics and found funds for their fieldwork, although none of these women achieved regular academic positions during his lifetime. Ruth Benedict, who went on to produce the most extreme example of Boas's integrationist thread, her *Patterns of Culture* (1934), became his administrative right hand, although she was passed over for his chair in favor of Ralph Linton.

After Mead moved from DePauw University to Barnard in her second year of college, she took courses with Boas, but it was Benedict to whom she became closest intellectually and personally. Mead took her M.A. in psychology with a thesis on Italian immigrant families in New Jersey (completing the study begun by her mother). Then—with Benedict's offer, on Boas's behalf, of "only work that mattered"—she embraced anthropology, writing a library dissertation on Polynesia (1928a).

Mead's maiden field trip to Samoa was in the spirit of Boas's scientific side. She had decided that she wanted to do fieldwork in Polynesia, and Boas agreed reluctantly, selecting for her a research topic he thought was consistent with her age and persona: the relative strength of biological puberty and cultural patterns of adolescence. Given the Boasian belief in cultures as diverse contexts for human development and behavior, the study would question the general assumption in the United States at the time that adolescence was inevitably stormy because of biological, hormonal givens. In fact, Mead made no effort to study "relative strengths" of biological and cultural factors; she thought, rather, that if she found a single negative case, it would disprove what was taken to be a universal. The study was also a pursuit of Boas's psychological interests, an attempt (as he said in the preface to *Coming of Age in Samoa* [1928b]) "to enter the mental life of a group in a primitive society." Mead's work opened up several new niches for anthropology, including new interests in the Pacific and several topics not heretofore central to the discipline. Moreover, once she acceded to her publisher's suggestion that she popularize her book by adding a chapter on implications for American society, it also became a touchstone for what would soon become her special public role as a commentator on American culture from the perspective of a trained observer of the exotic. *Coming of Age* was the initial basis for her popular fame and for much of the later criticism of her fieldwork; less attention has been paid to her parallel technical account, *Social Organization*

of *Manua* (1930a), which has been lauded for its ethnographic range and the probity of its analysis.

Mead's subsequent field studies in Oceania during the 1930s followed the same pattern of dual publication: a popular book that carried her message of cultural diversity and applied her research with primitives to issues in contemporary life, and records of her data and analysis for the use of specialists. Thus, Samoa was followed by Manus in the Admiralty Islands, which resulted in both *Growing Up in New Guinea: A Comparative Study of Primitive Education* (1930b) and a detailed monograph on kinship (1934). She went to Manus (with Reo Fortune) to study the presumed "animistic thought" of primitive children but found that the idea was erroneous, and instead she focused on how children's mode of thought changes as they grow into adulthood. She used these findings to speak, in her popular book, to the current American educational system and to offer recommendations for changing it.

Her next field trip (again with Fortune) was to the Mountain Arapesh in New Guinea. It yielded five monographs on material culture, supernaturalism, socioeconomic life, and other aspects of her ethnography. It is best known, however, as the first of her cases in *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (1935). Mead's central problem was to study "the different ways in which cultures patterned the expected behavior of males and females" (1972: 196). She continued this interest in her fieldwork in Mundugumor and then in Tchambuli (Chambri), both in the Sepik River area in New Guinea. These constitute the other cases in *Sex and Temperament*. The comparison of the three cases enabled her to make broad statements about the plasticity of human sex roles and the diverse ways in which biological differences are molded into culturally appropriate behaviors and temperaments of men and women. This book became enormously popular and influential in the United States.

In Bali, with Gregory Bateson, Mead focused especially on child rearing, which she linked to cultural patterns of various kinds. This work, along with that in Iatmul (on the Sepik in New Guinea), left a vast and unequaled photographic record (see Bateson and Mead 1942 for Bali), although Mead did not publish a full ethnographic account of either culture.

In reviewing Mead's Oceania ethnography, it is well to note how different her accounts are from the Boasian tradition out of which she emerged, even from her own doctoral dissertation on Polynesian culture traits and their diffusion. As Nancy McDowell (1980) has argued, Mead introduced a vivid sense of dynamic processes, of living people with their individual personality differences manipulating cultural norms as much as conforming to them, liberally laced with her own intuitive generalizations. In this, Mead ushered in a new style of ethnography and of ethnographic writing.

Mead's insistence upon culture and upon what cultural diversity has to teach modern society was cruelly distorted by Derek Freeman (1983, 1999) and other latter-day critics, who accused her of launching a long period of permissiveness in child rearing (in this she was presumably abetted by Dr. Benjamin Spock, her friend and family pediatrician) and associated societal ills from the sexual revolution to the antiwar movement. (Many of her admirers also attributed this influence to her, *crediting* her for it.) Neither Boas nor any of his students, including Mead, believed in "absolute cultural determinism," as Freeman charged. Boas's anthropology was premised on the interaction of biological and cultural phenomena (and he championed four-field anthropology partly on that basis), but he and his students were also continually battling against racial determinism, especially beliefs that the "races" had different mental capacities. Their weapon was a cultural determinism which argued that behavior and mentality were products of learning within specific cultural settings. Mead in Samoa was simply not concerned with studying the relative strengths of biology and culture, despite the formal phrasing of her research problem. Her point, along with other anthropologists of her time, was the fundamental lesson of cultural variability.

In fact, Mead herself was much inclined to bring biology into her explanations of cultural patterns. *Male and Female: A Study of the Sexes in a Changing World* brought to a popular postwar audience the problem, "How are men and women to think about their maleness and their femaleness in this twentieth century, in which so many of our old ideas must be made anew?" (1949: 13). Here Mead argued that every question involving human beings must consider both biology and culture and that "our full humanity" is "rooted in our biological ancestry that we dare not flout" (1949: 26). When she was criticized for trying to "have it both ways" (both cultural and biological explanations of sex differences), she responded that "we not only can have it both ways, but many more than both ways" (Sanday 1980: 340). This position later put her at odds with the feminist movement—Betty Friedan charged her with laying the cornerstone of the "feminine mystique"—although after her death feminists claimed her for their ranks.

Nevertheless, Mead's message about the role of culture in human affairs is one that anthropologists have had to return to again and again throughout the second half of the twentieth century, and it is no less relevant in a time when foreign policy is guided by a banal language of good and evil and when similar simplistic notions are made to define ethnically marked peoples. Cultural relativism never meant a bland denial of enduring values or of principled political stances, least of all as Mead intended it. It has always meant a quest for knowledge of cultural contexts and cultural causality. As Mead argued, to understand cultural processes in their own terms as a first step in that quest is not to be done or to excuse, but to fail to take that step is a formula for disaster.

This aspect of Mead remains vital for the present in a particular way, in view of the challenge of a "biology is destiny" wave that has been overtaking our pub-

lic discourse in recent years. This development, which was only beginning at the time of her death (if we take the publication of Edward O. Wilson's *Sociobiology* in 1975 as the opening gun), was the context in which Freeman launched his postmortem attack on Mead in 1983. Although he framed his argument around the charge that she was "hoaxed" by her Samoan informants (a charge he expanded in his later book [1999]), his agenda was in fact to discredit her culturalist stance. With the cultural dimension demolished, Freeman insinuated, the explanation of Samoan behavior would have to be (by default) rooted in biology. Moreover, through his equating of culture versus biology with positive versus negative human qualities, he underscored disagreeable qualities of Samoan life discounted in Mead's supposedly idyllic depiction. In fact, whatever limits there were to Mead's ethnography Freeman's assault neither identified nor corrected.

More importantly, Mead's insistence on the significance of culture, in all its complexity, for any understanding of human behavior speaks directly to the biological, genetic, and other new reductionisms that have become common not only in academic circles but also in the media and in policy discussions. Most prominent among these is the view that all of human behavior is the product of natural selection governed by Darwinian principles of reproductive competition. Like Mead's generation in their own struggles against racist theories, most anthropologists today acknowledge the evolutionary basis of human behavioral patterns but take strong issue with the erasure of cultural variability and of social and historical context in this approach. For example, when evolutionary psychologists designate specific items of behavior as universal and locate their origins in the conditions of the evolutionary past, the items identified are often neither neutral nor self-evident; rather, they are taken from our own or some other known culture and are defined in culturally framed ways. As Mead argued tirelessly (beginning with Samoa), for an item to be considered a universal it would have to apply to all known times and places, not just to isolated instances selected from here and there. Moreover, she would have insisted, because cultures are internally patterned they cannot be treated merely as lists of discrete items.

In the course of the 1990s, as the mapping of the human genome and other developments in genetics progressed, the earlier versions of biological determinism increasingly became genetic determinism. It is now "the gene" that is explanatory. Yet recent research of anthropologists has underlined the extent to which genetic "information" is shaped by and interwoven with social practices and cultural interpretations, which throws into question the use of notions of genetics as all-purpose explanations and problem solvers (e.g., Goodman et al. 2003). More than ever we need to remember what Mead and many other anthropologists labored long and hard to discover and affirm—the complexity of cultural phenomena that can only be severely violated if they are reduced to some presumably more "basic" level.

Mead was in many ways a pioneer. First and foremost was her approach to methodology. She saw other cultures as irreplaceable natural laboratories for science, and she was scrupulous about detailed recording, about keeping data in a form that made them usable by other scientists, and about stating explicitly the methods she used and the circumstances under which her data were collected. (In her field methods seminar at Columbia, she warned students that they needed to keep their notes in a form that—"if you died tomorrow"—they would be accessible to others.) She embraced new technologies as they emerged and saw them as tools as well as topics for anthropological research. A prime example was her early, elaborate use of photography and film as methods for field research, especially in Bali and Iatmul with Bateson. She was among the first to use psychological tests in the field, such as the Rorschach test and children's drawings. She also experimented with innovative ways of presenting her data and methods in monographs (McDowell 1980: 293).

Mead quickly grasped the implications of new developments in science and in other fields, such as the beginning of the atomic age, the invention of computers, and the emergence of cybernetics and systems theory. Each such development drew her into interdisciplinary collaborations, which involved her in numerous working committees, conferences, and joint publications; whatever the concrete results of these efforts, they gave social science (including anthropology) a voice in discussions of the vital issues of the day. Through her participation in such activities, Mead repeatedly defined new areas for anthropological interest, including such now-trendy topics as the built environment and science studies. She was in many ways anthropology's futurist: she wrote and spoke about the future of the family, of cities, of work and leisure, of education, of war and peace, and other themes that she believed anthropology could address. In her foreshadowing of directions that her discipline would take she was more right than wrong, even if others pursued these directions in ways different from those she anticipated.

I witnessed her reaction to one major development of our time. In the fall of 1957 I took one of her heavily enrolled courses in the General Studies Division at Columbia. One evening she asked the class: What was the most important thing that happened to you this week? Different people ventured responses: I found an apartment; I got a new job; I broke up with my boyfriend. After hearing us all out, Mead said: No, the most important thing that happened to you this week was that Sputnik went up. For most of us, there was a disconnect between what happened "to us" and what was unarguably the most important thing that happened to the world. Not for Mead. Her view was not only that we were all profoundly affected, now living in a changed world, but that anthropology was uniquely equipped to understand it; her first reaction to Sputnik was that every space flight from then on should carry an anthropologist. She never doubted that this could be done or that anthropology would yield special insights into our new world.

Mead was above all a pioneer in her commitment to a public role for anthropology—the third aspect of her work that I want to consider. She advocated anthropology's "going public" at a time when many would have been happy to be left alone to their academic pursuits. Throughout her career, she took two routes—often simultaneously—to bring her messages about culture and the anthropological perspective to the public. One was through her engagement with scientific projects, organizations, and networks, building alliances with other scientists and intellectuals to speak to the large concerns of the time and to try to influence public policy. The second route was her individual entrepreneurship, using especially the popular media (magazines, lectures to diverse audiences, radio, then television), a pattern that goes back to her early years when she was feted as the girl scientist among the savages.

As World War II loomed, she immersed herself in this public role. Unlike in the wartimes of the latter twentieth century, anthropologists, like others in America and the allied countries, eagerly enlisted in the common cause. The problem anthropologists had was not any doubts or dissension about the war effort but the fact that no one in government paid much attention to them. But Mead, for one, had extraordinary confidence in the potential of anthropology to point to directions for national policy. She also had extraordinary naïveté.

Her frame of mind can be detected from a letter she wrote to Eleanor Roosevelt in August 1939 (cited in Yans-McLaughlin 1986: 194–95). Identifying herself "as a professional anthropologist" who was speaking in light of her "field experience of simpler social systems" and referring to the conjectures of some psychiatrists about "Hitler's peculiar psychological make-up," she claims that we can "enlist Hitler actively on the side of peace" and "halt [his] present march towards destruction." What Mrs. Roosevelt needed to do was to urge her husband to "divert [Hitler] from an undesirable course towards a desirable one" by putting his past acts "into a moral setting" and persuading him that he, "by virtue of his great constructive efforts to build up his own country, had the chance now" for greater glory, by building the peace of all Europe. (A month later, Hitler overran Poland.)

This pattern of direct approaches to presidents (or their wives) was to continue throughout her life. It reached its height in her contacts with Jimmy Carter, to whom she offered advice based on her reading of his personality and of his regional culture. Both in personal encounters and in letters to "Dear Jimmy," she held forth on numerous issues facing his administration and even analyzed his style of leadership with diagrams (for which he graciously thanked her) (Dillon 1980: 320–24).

Her first organizational effort to engage World War II came in 1939 with her involvement, along with several psychologists and other behavioral scientists, in the Committee for National Morale, a private organization whose purpose was

to prepare social scientists to analyze population morale and advise the government on how to advance it. In 1942 she shifted her focus to a Committee on Food Habits of the National Research Council, becoming its executive secretary. In that capacity she initiated multidisciplinary research geared to policies to change the food habits of Americans and to feed our allies; the research yielded recommendations if not actual influences on government policy (Mabee 1987: 3-5).

The best-known aspect of Mead's contribution to the war effort was her prominent place within a group of anthropologists who used their skills to provide cultural analyses of our enemies and allies. What became the "national character" approach began with the four anthropologists on the Committee for National Morale, working closely with Benedict and Geoffrey Gorer, and was further advanced when Mead, along with Bateson, Lawrence K. Frank, and Edwin R. Embree formed the Council for Intercultural Relations in 1941 (Mead 1959: 351). Drawing on the personality-and-culture movement of the 1930s and developing methods for studying cultures no longer directly accessible, they extended the notion of "cultural character structure" to depictions of the Japanese, German, Russian, British, and peoples of other nations. Mead herself wrote (in 1942) one of the first books in this vein, on the American character, *And Keep Your Powder Dry*, which was intended to aid the morale of the American public (1965 [1942]). These studies were designed to predict the behavior of particular groups, and as Mead later recounted, they had a variety of political purposes: to implement specific governmental programs, to facilitate relationships with allies and partisan groups in occupied countries, to help estimate enemy strengths and weaknesses, and to recommend and provide rationales for policies (Mead and Metraux 1953: 397). Mead credited the national-character work, specifically Benedict's research on the Japanese for the Office of War Information, with having a direct impact on the American government's decision to retain the Japanese emperor as a figurehead at the end of the war. Others have found little evidence of this widely accepted claim and believe that Alexander Leighton was closer to the reality in observing that government policymakers used social science the way a drunk uses a lamppost, for support rather than light (Mabee 1987: 10).

After the war Benedict and Mead expanded this effort into a large-scale project, the Columbia University Research in Contemporary Cultures, under a grant from the U.S. Office of Naval Research. The project was organized around research groups that focused on seven different cultures, which would be studied "at a distance," from New York City. When Benedict died in 1948 Mead became the project coordinator. Mead's hope was to expand the range of cultures included, and as always, her ambition was as grand as her sweep, but the project found little resonance with policymakers and it fell into obscurity.

During the postwar years of rapid change throughout the world, Mead initiated and encouraged studies of cultural continuities and change, revisiting areas where she had done fieldwork before the war (usually in the company of younger scholars now working there) and commenting from her anthropological perspective on changes in other societies, including her own. In the standoffs of the Cold War, she remained firm in the conviction that cross-cultural communication held the key to peace. Throughout this time she was a prominent public presence, pursuing both routes to bringing anthropology to national (and international) consciousness and policy. (Wilton Dillon has described her as "a multinational enterprise . . . acting on a series of world stages" [1980: 332].) She used her fame and personal contacts in the political arena, such as by testifying before Congress, and was active in numerous organizations of scientists addressing public issues. Despite the chastening experiences of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the chilling effect of McCarthyism on many of her professional colleagues, her confidence in the power of anthropology was not diminished.

This was the period of her life when I knew Margaret Mead, when I was a student at Columbia during the late 1950s and early 1960s. Her primary base was still at the American Museum of Natural History. I first met her, as had countless others before and since, by climbing the stairs to her tower office with a letter of introduction from someone in her vast network of acquaintances to ask her for career advice, which she gave generously. She taught part-time in the Columbia anthropology department, whether by her choice or theirs we did not know; she held the title of adjunct professor but never had a regular appointment there. My cohort was advised by more advanced graduate students to avoid working too closely with her; if you became her student you would have her attention and loyalty, but other professors would not take you seriously. Still, we took her courses, and we learned some useful things from her: how to pay attention, with an anthropological ear, to the world beyond the university; how to take field notes (and mail them home regularly); how to remember people's names (as a result of which I still remember the name of one student in our seminar unknown to me before or since); how to identify the cultural background of informants she brought in to demonstrate interviewing techniques (my guesses were always wildly wrong); and other wisdom, both valuable and dubious.

The revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s and the divisions of the Vietnam era shattered the illusions of anthropologists not only—like others—of national unity but also of the unity of anthropology. In this intradisciplinary strife, Mead often found herself opposed and embattled. She never gave up the ideal, born of World War II, of an anthropology in service to the national cause, even when there was reason to question the cause.

Within the AAA, matters came to a head in 1970 when charges were made public that a number of anthropologists were implicated in counterinsurgency research in Thailand. Mead was appointed to head a committee to investigate the charges, as well as the countercharges that the Ethics Committee of the Association had acted improperly in questioning the activities of colleagues. Its official name was "Ad Hoc Committee to Evaluate the Controversy Concerning Anthropological Activities in Thailand," but it was always referred to as the Mead Committee. Mead was the "obvious choice" for this role because of the respect she commanded—according to George Foster, then president-elect of the AAA, she was a "mother-goddess" in her relationship to the tribe of anthropologists (Wakin 1992: 201).

The Mead Committee report in essence chastised the Ethics Committee while downplaying the original charges. The report concluded that the anthropological research now treated under the label of "counterinsurgency" referred to "much the same activities that were called 'community development' at an earlier time. . . . [It is] well within the traditional canons of acceptable behavior for the applied anthropologist, and is counterinsurgent only for present funding purposes; a decade ago it might have been 'mental health'" (Wakin 1992: 205). At the next meeting of the AAA, the membership roundly rejected Mead's report in a humiliating repudiation of this epic figure. In a final chapter of the story, Mead had all the documents of her committee's investigations destroyed (this despite her long insistence on the preservation of research records for the use of other scholars). Referring to the behavior of those who had opposed acceptance of the report, she wrote to the executive director of the AAA in 1972: "After the continuing display of irresponsibility, the committee decided to destroy the files. This was done" (Wakin 1992: 230).

Despite, or because of, her public role, there was always a distinct ambivalence in the relationship between Mead and the anthropological profession. She was dismissed by many as a popularizer; E. E. Evans-Pritchard's characterization of the Samoa book as "the rustling-of-the-wind-in-the-palm-trees" kind of anthropology was widely repeated by her own compatriots. (Ironically, Freeman's attack led to a posthumous reappraisal and defense of her scholarship by some who had been critical of it.) Some of this ambivalence surely came from envy of her fame, but many anthropologists despaired of her too-ready generalizations, for she would speak unhesitatingly—often authoritatively but sometimes pushing beyond her knowledge with shrewd guesswork—and offer anthropologically informed opinions on practically any subject put to her. At the same time, she was the conscience and the scold of the profession, both for those who agreed with her and those who did not, those who found her analyses compelling and those who considered them trivial. In a real sense, she guarded the borders between anthropology and the public; to a large extent, she succeeded both in raising the stature of the discipline in the world and in keeping her colleagues in line. For years after her

death, anthropologists lamented that there was now no one else to speak for them to their publics.

Mead's commitment to engaging public issues and applying her science to them left a legacy for anthropologists who came after her. But it must be said that her vigor and outspokenness in public pronouncements went along with a certain timidity where controversial political matters were at stake. She avoided giving offense—for the sake, she would have said, of wielding influence in the longer term—and she preferred working behind the scenes rather than direct confrontation. I had a taste of this when, in 1976, I contacted her for help in a crisis facing the anthropology programs in the City University of New York. She refused my request to intervene and instead chastised me, saying, "Be an anthropologist!" (the most stinging reprimand an anthropologist could receive). I later learned that she had in fact made the calls I had asked for, and they were effective.

Using Mead's own accounts to look back over her life as a public anthropologist (or an anthropologist in public), I believe one can see a remarkable consistency in what she thought she was about, although she adapted her purpose to the needs of different times. She began her work as an ethnographer with a scientific goal—to construct a systematic picture of how human culture works—and with an avowedly scientific methodology, taking primitive societies as her laboratory. But she always had another purpose in mind for this work: to provide a scientific basis for building a better world (1965: 14). Her interests, she later said, had always turned on the relevance of the study of primitive peoples to our understanding of our own customary behavior and our attempts to change it, and for that reason she had always ended her books on peoples of the South Seas with a discussion of how the results could be applied to modern societies (1965: xxvii).

But she thought of a "better world" from her distinctively American perspective, and she never pretended to scientific detachment in the messages she brought to her public. She wrote that her 1942 account of the American national character was "frankly and completely partisan" (1965: xi), and she regretted that contemporary anthropological studies of the United States (the Middletown, Yankee City, and Deep South books) were critical of ("indicted") American culture. Her own book ended with an expression of faith that Americans have the tools necessary to develop a new world order, one that would allow the realization of human potentials (1965 [1942]: 252). Moreover, her optimism about America was not just wartime patriotism. Her introduction to *New Lines for Old* says:

This book is set firmly against such pessimism [about our ability to meet the challenges of the world of the 1950s]. It is based on the belief that American civilization is not simply the last flower to bloom on the outmoded tree of European history . . . but something new and different. . . . This book is based on the belief that Americans have something to contribute to a changing world which is precious. . . . This

precious quality . . . is a belief that men can learn and change . . . quickly, happily, without violence, without madness, without coercion, and of their own free will. (1966 [1956]: 31)

Another aspect of Mead's consistency was her view of the role of government and of a citizenry's relationship to it. This view was set firmly in place during the World War II period, as Dillon has suggested (1980: 335). Although she was not a champion of big or intrusive government—on the contrary, her ideal was “small is beautiful,” and she believed that individuals and small groups had the power to change the world—she thought it was the responsibility of anthropologists, as citizens and scientists, to support government policies and work to enlighten and improve them. No doubt her unchanged convictions in this regard were the source of her misreading of anthropologists' positions on the Thailand affair and her dismay at the AAA membership's reaction to her role in it.

Underlying what I have described as Mead's consistency as an anthropologist in public was the fact that, in Dillon's words (1980: 337), she “was free of conflict between her roles as fastidious fieldworker and as improver of the self-knowledge of her countrymen by sharing anthropology with governments and various publics.” Yet the relationship between those two roles took different forms as times changed. She described some of that process herself in her introduction to *New Lives for Old*.

During the early years of her intensive ethnography, a sense of the Boasian scientific mission dominated. This was the first time, she said, that the scientific world of the West was ready to use constructively knowledge of the so-called vanishing living behavior of people not yet within any of the great streams of civilization. Anthropologists could now go beyond armchair ruminations and set up problems to answer—not by turning human beings into experimental animals, but by scientifically controlled observations of the living stuff of history. And the payoff would be that we could add enormously to our knowledge of human potentialities (1966: 35). Where to go to do this work was a judgment about what was the logical next step in our developing science (1966: 36).

Priorities changed, however, when the immediate threat was Nazism and fascism; now the need was to choose problems that could confront the threat. For Mead, the most pressing problem was how individuals become members of a culture, regardless of their racial inheritance or the culture of their ancestors. This meant a focus on the study of personality in culture, character formation, and the relationship of cultural character to institutions. The emphasis in this had to be on human plasticity (1966: 37). The study target also shifted, from primitives to modern nations. The postwar, post-Hiroshima, world—a time of emergency for humankind—presented new challenges. Mead saw the key problem then as how change occurred in a single generation, the problem that took her back to Mannus in 1953 (1966: 38).

After this revisit, she did no further fieldwork but concentrated on the second of her roles, as an “improver” of the self-knowledge of her countrymen—and increasingly of an international public as well. Yet she did so cloaked in the mystique and the knowledge that came out of her life as a field-worker. It is said that she sometimes consulted her New Guinea field notes before going into a committee meeting on some current social problem or testifying before Congress, just as her pronouncements in the media about American culture drew continually on her storehouse of ethnographic examples.

Much has changed in anthropology and in the world since Mead first “went public.” Her ready prescriptions for her own society based upon her fieldwork among the primitives came to be seen—not surprisingly—as simplistic, although we can appreciate the validity of her underlying message. Her national-character contributions to the war effort have long been criticized for their ready collapsing of internal complexities and historical contingencies into thumbnail accounts of nationwide uniformities. The Cold War world of aligned nation-states and a passive Third World has passed, and anthropology has turned its efforts toward grasping processes of transnationalism, globalization, political mobilization, and cultural reconstitution. No one would have been less surprised by these changes in her discipline than Mead, and she herself anticipated some of them, but there is little in her work that offers analytical guidance for such a reshaping of anthropology.

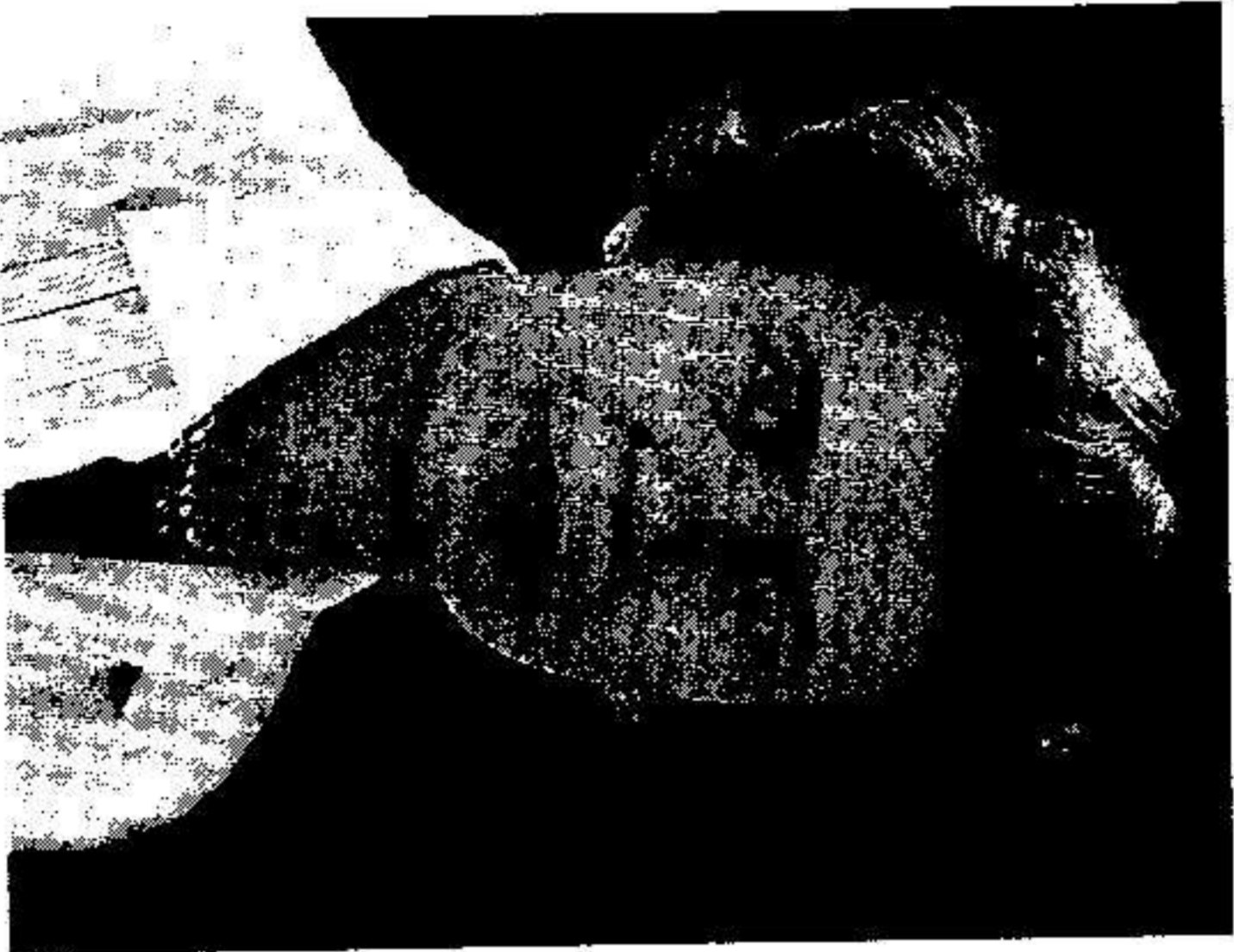
The publics to whom anthropology speaks today are different from those of Mead's time. Undergraduate classes that used to learn about cultural diversity by being introduced to the exotic peoples of the world now often include some of those exotics, and students may themselves practice and believe in the odd customs their anthropology professors exhibited for culture shock or pedagogical titillation. Another of anthropology's publics, those with whom and for whom anthropologists work beyond the walls of academia, has also changed. Applied anthropology goes back to Mead's own time, and indeed she was one of its architects. But today more than ever in the past, anthropologists are employed by organizations of various kinds that set the terms of what the anthropologist will do and how his or her work will be used. This situation poses contradictions that defy Mead's confident prescriptions for using anthropology for the enlightenment of nonprofessionals. Still another public is the citizenry to which anthropologists belong and to which they may wish to contribute their expertise—for example, when anthropologists find themselves among the few people who know anything about the strange and distant places that suddenly become the fare of daily news. For Mead, this role was unproblematic, but it becomes more complicated when the anthropologist has deep criticisms of government policies. Mead would have advised caution in expressing criticism for the sake of ultimately being able to exert influence, but some would find this strategy naïve and futile. Finally, there is “the public” at large. This is a different lot than those who read Mead's columns in *Redbook* or listened to her expound on late-night

television about cultural differences in gender definition or child rearing. Today's public is both more sophisticated and more misguided than was Mead's. It is doubtful that her assertions and admonitions would be as convincing as they once seemed.

Each of these new publics represents challenges for the anthropologist. Margaret Mead would have seized the challenges with gusto, and she would probably have turned a blind eye to the contradictions and dilemmas they pose, exhorting her colleagues to "just get to work." Hers was a presence that belongs to another time, and it is one that has no real successor in anthropology today.

SYDEL SILVERMAN

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE



Courtesy of Daniel Metraux

c. 1970

RHODA METRAUX was born in 1914 in Brooklyn, New York. She attended Vassar College, where she received a B.A. in English literature in 1934, and went on to Columbia University to study anthropology. In the early 1940s she carried out fieldwork in Haiti, in collaboration with her then-husband Alfred Metraux; in Mexico, on a study of responses to wartime food shortages; and in Argentina. She returned to Haiti in 1948–1949 to work on a UNESCO project in fundamental education, which formed the basis for her Ph.D. dissertation at Columbia, "Kith and Kin: A Study of Creole Social Structure in Marbial, Haiti" (1951). During the war Metraux served on the planning staff of the Office of Strategic Services, studying problems of German civilian and Japanese armed-forces

morale. Having also worked closely with Margaret Mead on the Committee on Food Habits, she was intimately involved in the project initiated by Mead with Ruth Benedict, the Columbia University Research in Contemporary Cultures, which continued from 1947 to 1953. In this project, Metraux applied the methods of qualitative analysis of verbal materials she had developed in her earlier work, combining them now with interview data and historical sources to construct depictions of cultures that were not accessible through fieldwork. Metraux, whose particular area of expertise was French culture, was co-editor of two of the volumes to result from the project, *The Study of Culture at a Distance* (Mead and Metraux 1953) and *Themes in French Culture* (Metraux and Mead 1954). In 1952–1953 she directed a project on German national character, which was the basis for three chapters on German children that she contributed to *Childhood in Contemporary Cultures* (Mead and Wolfenstein 1955).

When these projects ended, Metraux became director of the Montserrat (British West Indies) Anthropological Expedition. She then served as associate director of a study of "the factor of allopsychic orientation in mental health" funded by the National Institutes of Health, in which she applied the methods she had earlier developed for work on verbal and visual materials to the analysis of sensory modalities. She returned to Montserrat in 1966, when she embarked on a project to compare the cultural structure of imagery there with Manus and Iatmul of Papua New Guinea, peoples that had been studied by Mead and her collaborators in the 1930s. In several trips to Iatmul (some in Mead's company), she looked at continuity and change since Mead's original study and recorded traditional music.

Rhoda Metraux, an active researcher and lecturer on anthropological contributions to psychology and psychiatry, education, and the health sciences, maintained her institutional base at the American Museum of Natural History. She now lives in retirement in Vermont.