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MARGARET MEAD

*1901—1978*

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*A Biographical Memoir by*  
CLIFFORD GEERTZ

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*Biographical Memoir*

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Anthony di Gessu, La Jolla, California

*Anthony di Gessu*

## MARGARET MEAD

*December 16, 1901–November 15, 1978*

BY CLIFFORD GEERTZ

MARGARET MEAD was probably the most famous anthropologist of her time, and even more probably the most controversial. Author of more than fifteen hundred books, articles, films, and occasional pieces; a tireless public speaker traveling the world to instruct and persuade; a field researcher of extraordinarily extensive and varied experience; a hyperactive organizer of projects, conferences, programs, and careers; and possessed of a seemingly endless fund of opinions on every subject under the sun that she was all too willing to share with anyone who asked, and many who did not; she left no one who came into contact with her or her works indifferent to either.

Even death, which came from pancreatic cancer in the winter of 1978, a month shy of her seventy-seventh birthday, did not still the debates that circulated about her person and her work. The appearance in 1983 of the New Zealand/Australian anthropologist Derek Freeman's highly publicized wholesale attack on her first book, *Coming of Age in Samoa*, published fifty-five years earlier, began yet another round of intense and often bitter discussion, both popular and professional, whose end is still not in sight. She was the subject of a special memorial issue of the *American Anthropologist* in June 1980, in which eight of her students and coworkers contrib-

uted assessments of various aspects of her work; of an affecting memoir by her daughter, Mary Catherine Bateson, herself an anthropologist, in 1984; and of a mammoth, fact-crammed popular biography by Jane Howard, also in 1984. The following memoir is heavily dependent upon these latter works, supplemented—even colored, perhaps, for they are very vivid—with certain remembrances of my own.<sup>1</sup>

#### THE CAREER

For all the complexity of her person and the variety of her interests, Mead's biography is fairly simply told, for once she found her path—in the early 1920s—she never diverged from it. Impulsive, improvisatory, peripatetic, she may have been, as well as socially unorthodox, but she led a directed life, willed and implacable.

She was born in Philadelphia in December 1901, the first of five children, to Emily Fogg and Edward Sherwood Mead. Her father was a professor of economics at the Wharton School of Finance of the University of Pennsylvania. Her mother had been a schoolteacher before marriage (and subsequently did some work toward a master's degree in sociology), as had been her paternal grandmother, Martha Ramsay Mead, who lived with the family during Mead's childhood. After a Quaker elementary school education in Philadelphia

<sup>1</sup> *American Anthropologist*, 82,2 (1980):261–373; Mary Catherine Bateson, *With a Daughter's Eye* (New York: Morrow, 1984); Jane Howard, *Margaret Mead, A Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984). For a full bibliography, missing only the last few years, and with an introduction by Mead on her writings, see *Margaret Mead: The Complete Bibliography 1925–1975*, ed. Joan Gordan, (The Hague: Mouton, 1976). For a sensitive appreciation from outside anthropology, see Renée Fox, "Margaret Mead," *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (New York: The Free Press, 1979). Of the numerous newspaper obituaries, the fullest is that by Alden Whitman of *The New York Times*, November 16, 1978. Mead's own account of her early life is available as *Blackberry Winter: My Earlier Years* (New York: Morrow, 1972).

It should also be remarked that the inordinate delay in the appearance of this memoir is a result of the fact that I was asked to write it only after the person to whom it was originally assigned failed at length to produce it.

and public high school in nearby Doylestown, Mead attended DePauw University, Greencastle, Indiana. She actively disliked DePauw and left after a year to transfer to Barnard College. She majored in psychology at Barnard, ultimately writing a master's essay on intelligence testing of Italian and American children. For her doctoral work she moved, in 1923, into anthropology at Columbia University under Franz Boas and Ruth Benedict, writing a library thesis on cultural stability in Polynesia. In 1925—despite the misgivings of her teachers and most of her friends—she travelled, aged twenty-three, alone and enervated, to Samoa for her first field trip.

In a pattern that she was to repeat several times and indeed never wholly abandon, two works—one popular, tentative, schematic, and over-discussed; one technical, detached, detailed, and generally neglected—resulted from this nine-month field study: *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928) and *The Social Organization of Manu'a* (1930). In 1928–1929 Mead worked in Manus in the Admiralty Islands off the north coast of New Guinea for eight months, from which came the popular *Growing Up in New Guinea* (1930) and the technical *Kinship in the Admiralty Islands* (1934). After a summer's work among the Omaha Indians in Nebraska in 1930 (from which a study, *The Changing Culture of an Indian Tribe* [1932] resulted with the usual immediacy, though in this case with rather little impact, public or professional), Mead journeyed to New Guinea, where she worked among three different groups—the Tchambuli (or Chambri), the Mundugumor (or Biwat), and the Arapesh—between December 1931 and spring 1933. Again, two major works resulted: one for the world, argumentative and controversial, *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (1935), and one for the trade, systematic and not much noticed, *The Mountain Arapesh* (1938–1949). From March 1936 to March 1938, plus another six weeks in 1939, Mead worked in Bali, The Netherlands

East Indies, producing perhaps her finest single study, the essay in *Balinese Character: A Photographic Analysis*, Bateson and Mead (1942). Finally, in 1953, she conducted a six-month restudy of Manus, which emerged in 1956 as *New Lives for Old: Cultural Transformation—Manus 1928–1953*. Various short revisits to her sites aside (she made at least a half-dozen of them between 1964 and 1975 alone, and nearly twenty altogether), Mead thus carried out nearly six years of extensive field research in no less than seven cultures—all of them except Bali and the transformed Manus, neolithic; all save the Omaha, in the South Pacific—and wrote substantial books (and numerous articles) about all of them. It is a record, like Malinowski's monograph *Fleuve* or Frazer's galactic compilation, unlikely to be broken.

Not that she was otherwise idle while accomplishing this. As early as 1926 she was appointed assistant curator of ethnology of the American Museum of Natural History in New York, a position she maintained (advancing to associate curator in 1942; curator in 1964; and curator emerita, but hardly retired, in 1969) until her death, and whose obligations as collector, documentor, conservator, and exhibition designer she took extremely seriously. She added upwards of three thousand items to the Museum's inventory, planned several dioramas, made hundreds of photographs and a number of films, raised (and, not insignificantly, contributed) funds, and finally created, apparently by sheer insistence, ("this has been part of my own working life for forty-five years"<sup>2</sup>) the splendid Peoples of the Pacific Hall, which opened there in 1971.

Although it took Columbia University until 1954 to bring itself to make her an adjunct professor, she also taught: at

<sup>2</sup> D. H. Thomas, "Margaret Mead as a Museum Anthropologist," *American Anthropologist*, op. cit., p. 357, an excellent review of this rather little known aspect of Mead's career.

Vassar in 1939–1940, 1940–1941, 1945–1946; at New York University in 1940, and from 1965 to 1967; at Wellesley in 1944; at The Menninger Foundation in 1959; at Columbia from 1947 to 1951, in 1952–1953, and from 1954 to 1978; at Fordham University from 1968 to 1970; and at the University of Rhode Island in 1970–1971. She was, *inter alia*, a great many *alia*, Jacob Gimbel Lecturer in the Psychology of Sex, at Stanford University and the University of California (1946); Mason Lecturer, University of Birmingham, England (1949); Inglis Lecturer, Graduate School of Education, Harvard University (1950); Ernest Jones Lecturer, British Psychoanalytic Society (1957); and Dwight Terry Lecturer on Religion in the Light of Science and Philosophy, Yale University (1957). During the Second World War she lectured at the Office of War Information and afterwards at UNESCO and the National Institute of Mental Health. How many student groups, women's clubs, alumni associations, and professional organizations she addressed will probably never be known.

Beyond field research, curating, and teaching, Mead was a tireless organizer and director of an astonishing variety of intellectual and social enterprises. The list of her "memberships" in a curriculum vitae apparently prepared a year or so before her death ("Full material is provided so that each one can select the particular items relevant for his or her purpose") runs to eighty-four items, from Parents Without Partners, Spirit of Stockholm Foundation, National Council for Negro Women, and General Board of Examining Chaplains of the Episcopal Church to Anthropological Film Research Institute, World Federation for Mental Health, Society for Psychical Research, and The Association for Social Anthropology in Eastern Oceania. She served no less than twenty-six of these groups in some sort of executive capacity. She was, at various points, president of The Society for Applied

Anthropology (1949), The American Anthropological Association (1960), and The American Association for the Advancement of Science (1975).

She was the moving force in the Research in Contemporary Cultures program at Columbia from 1948 to 1950, in which more than 120 people, including Ruth Benedict, Geoffrey Gorer, Nathan Leites, Martha Wolfenstein, and Rhoda Metraux, participated, and from which a number of her own "national character" studies, notably *Soviet Attitudes Toward Authority* (1951) and (with Metraux) *Themes in French Culture* (1954), emerged. By the time she was finished, she was covered with honors, including twenty-eight honorary degrees (Delhi, Kalamazoo, Harvard, Lincoln, Women's Medical College of Pennsylvania . . .), the Viking Medal in Anthropology (1957–1958), and, in 1975 (rather late, she thought, as did a great many others) fellowship in The National Academy of Sciences. In 1977 she was admitted to the American Philosophical Society. In 1979 she was posthumously awarded The Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Mead was married three times: first, in 1923, to Luther Cressman, a theological student, from whom she was divorced in 1928; second, in 1928, to the New Zealand anthropologist Reo Fortune, with whom she worked in Manus, among the Omaha, and on New Guinea, and from whom she was divorced in 1935; and third, in 1936, to the English anthropologist Gregory Bateson, with whom she worked in Bali and New Guinea, and from whom she was divorced in 1950. All three of her husbands survived her, as did her daughter, Mary Catherine Bateson Kassarjian, at the time of her mother's death, dean of social sciences at Reza Shah Civar University in Iran; a granddaughter, Sevanne Kassarjian; and one of her sisters, Elizabeth Mead Steig. When she died, the people of Manus rested seven days in mourning and planted a coconut tree.



## THE WORK

As with any scholar who produces so vast and varied an output, no simple verdict is possible concerning the overall quality of Mead's work. Some of it was clearly hasty, ill-considered, and casually argued, even irresponsible. Some of it was routine, banal, momentarily useful at best, page-filling at worst. Some of it was professional, careful, a modest but genuine addition to knowledge. And some of it was extraordinarily fine, revolutionary when written and revolutionary still. It is doubtful that any anthropologist, save perhaps she herself, ever has read or ever will read everything, even everything professional, she wrote (certainly, I have not); but any anthropologist, in any way serious, has read and for some time to come will read some of it. She started a great many hares and she caught a number of them.

Even an attempt to demarcate the major areas, beyond Oceanic ethnography as such, in which Mead made her main contributions is likely to prove controversial, for she had a way of making everyone from nutritionists to cinematographers feel that their interest was at the very center of her concern, before all others. Nevertheless, from a detached perspective, four areas seem to be those upon which the durability of her reputation will ultimately rest: psychological anthropology; applied anthropology; ethnographic method; and a complex of concerns centering around gender roles, child socialization, and the family, which now would perhaps be called women's studies, a categorization she would have found, and toward the end of her life increasingly did find, constrictive.

Psychological anthropology was a major theme in her work from her first full-scale field study—of the Samoans in the mid-1920s, concerned as it was with undermining the *Sturm und Drang* conception of adolescence—to her last, the

return to Manus in the mid-1960s, where the subject was “[the] strange emergence of a group of erstwhile savages twice upon the world stage, once unconscious of their role, now fully aware of it” (*New Lives for Old*, 186), and the subject of one of her very last papers, a retrospective summary piece published posthumously in 1979, “The Evocation of Psychologically Relevant Responses in Ethnological Field Work” (in ed. G. Spindler, *The Making of Psychological Anthropology*, pp. 88–139. Berkeley: University of California Press).

There were essentially three overlapping phases of this work: first, that represented by *Growing Up in New Guinea*, with its attack on fixed stages of cognitive growth (the children were “realists,” the adults “animists”), as well as by the Samoan study, in which proposed universalities of psychological functioning were up-ended by particular counter-cases; the second, usually referred to as “culture and personality” research, in which particular cultural mechanisms (teasing, swaddling) were sought out to account for particular psychological traits (affectlessness, suppressed rage); and the third, usually referred to as “national character” work, in which entire societies (Russian, French, American) were characterized in psychological terms (paranoid, reserved, optimistic). If the first of these suffered from a tendency toward thesis driving, the second from a rather mechanical conception of the relation between child socialization and adult character, and the third from a certain over-ambitiousness, taken together they established, especially in the Manus, Balinese, and American studies, the foundations for virtually all subsequent work in this area.

The second area, applied anthropology, was in many ways Mead’s dominant concern, determined as she was to make her science serve human needs. It took her into a large number of government-related “policy science” activities, including the direction, as executive secretary, of The Committee

on Food Habits of the National Research Council during World War II. Her concern continued after the war and contributed to the enactment of the Child Nutrition Act of 1978. Five days before her death she sent a "Dear Jimmy" telegram to President Carter from her hospital bed urging him to sign it.

Her practical interests pervade all her work and determine its fundamental direction. Race conflict, child care, marital relations, women's rights, technological development of Third World countries, mental health, education, drug abuse, the generation gap, American foreign policy, environmentalism, aging, and nuclear disarmament all came—and repeatedly—under her gaze, half-ethnographic, half-moralist, entirely passionate. And (some rather too quotable remarks aside), she had useful things, novel and challenging, nicely provocative, to say about all of them. Her foundation, in 1944, of The Institute of Intercultural Studies, to "stimulate . . . research . . . most likely to affect intercultural and international relations," and to which she dedicated the greater part of her sizeable income, is only the clearest expression of the centrality of the applied dimension in Mead's conception of what she was about: "building a new world . . . through a disciplined science of human relations" (*Balinese Character*, xvi).

Mead's concern with methodological matters was with her from the beginning, intellectual daughter of Franz Boas that she was, but it was powerfully stimulated by attacks on her, as she became prominent, as "impressionistic," "intuitive," "subjective," and, to her the most painful cut of all, "unscientific." Mead was totally committed (as her other mentor, Ruth Benedict, for example, was not) to the view that anthropology was or ought to be a science, pure and simple, just like the others. Most of her methodological discussions and enterprises came in reaction to accusations that it, or anyway

she, was anything less than thoroughly objective, logically rigorous, resolutely empirical. ("Each time I write something about 'how I really do it'," she once complained to me, "'they' use it to show that I'm not to be trusted.")

With a candor and bravery not otherwise matched in social anthropology—and certainly not by her whitecoated critics, who tend to shoot at her from behind oneway mirrors—Mead continuously exposed her field procedures to full view and evaluation (her papers deposited in the Library of Congress—letters, field notes, manuscripts; a half-million items in all—probably constitute the fullest and most open record of an ethnographer's work practices extant). Her search for new and better methods was relentless.

At various points she experimented with several forms of psychological testing—projective, Piagetian, IQ; with the analysis of children's play and children's paintings; with hyper-behaviorist, timed observations ("There are two sorts of anthropologists," she once said, pointedly, to me, "'talking' anthropologists and 'looking' anthropologists: I'm a 'looking' anthropologist."); with life-history recording; with modes of language learning and language use; and perhaps most extensively with photography and with that original combination of documentary research, film analysis, expatriate interviewing, and literary study that she called "culture at a distance."

Some of these efforts were more successful than others. Even Gregory Bateson was, or so at least he said to me, unconvinced of some of Mead's claims for the probative value of their photographic work. Even a sympathetic observer must cock a quizzical eye at the oddly phrased claim (in her *vita*) that "she has had to learn to use seven primitive languages"; and projective testing is not much now in fashion. But the vigor with which she pursued the most intractable problems of ethnographic method and the great impact her

experiments and reflections have had upon research practice in general are hardly to be denied.

As for the complex of issues centering around the family, socialization, gender roles, and the status of women, they were more deeply rooted in Mead's unusually complex personal life than any other aspect of her work: in her relation to her mother, her grandmother, her sisters, her daughter, and her granddaughter; in her college-formed, lifelong friendships with a number of extraordinarily talented professional and artistic women; in her long-term, deeply intimate relationship with Ruth Benedict; in her earliest investigations into the erotic freedom of Samoan girls, the marital dominance of Tchambuli women, and the emotional inconstancy of Balinese mothers. Finally—in her ambiguous relations in the last years of her life with the reborn feminist movement in the United States—Mead was acclaimed by some as a heroine who had made it in a man's world on her own terms. Yet she was derided by others as a "Queen Bee" and an "Aunt Tom" who (as Betty Friedan, an *ennemie amicale* for many years, told Joan Howard) "played a considerable role in getting us all so preoccupied with 'fulfillment.'" Professionally, the culmination of this concern was her 1949 *Male and Female*, with its *vive la différence*, to each his or her own, point of view. But all in all she probably wrote more on marriage, family, gender, sexuality, childhood, and child-raising than on any other set of issues—much of it influential, most of it controversial, all of it heartfelt.

#### THE PERSON

Trying to sum up Margaret Mead in a few considered and professional pages is, for someone who knew her, if not intimately at least live and in color, a bit like trying to inscribe the Bible—or perhaps the *Odyssey*—on the head of a pin. She escapes most categories and mocks the rest.

My own most vivid memories are two. The first is of going with my then wife, Hildred Geertz, to see her in 1950, when she was at the height of her celebrity, in the famous tower in the American Museum to ask whether a philosophy major and an English major from a small Ohio college where the subject was not even taught ought to become anthropologists. Although she did not know of us before (the appointment had been arranged by one of those, also famous, young women she collected about her in the tower as aides of all-work, who happened to be a friend of ours), she spent the entire afternoon showing us her notes, photographs, project outlines, telling us about the field (and some of the leading personalities in it!), extolling its possibilities for free spirits such as we imagined ourselves to be, and practically commanding us to enter it. We left commanded.

The other memory is from seven years later. My wife and I, journeymen now, are in a very small village on the Balinese coast, so remote it cannot be reached by automobile. We have been there for a week or so observing a gigantic cremation being held by some relatives of the family with whom we were living. At the climax of this extravaganza—my wife is up by the palace where the procession will begin, I am down toward the burning ground a half mile away where it will end, in a desperate attempt to “cover” it—the enormous, tumbling crowd, hundreds of people half-shrouded in heat and dust, suddenly parts, as in a deMille movie, and there standing, leaning authoritatively on a stick, is Margaret Mead. I thought: “If an anthropologist goes mad in the field, this is the way it will happen—hallucinating Margaret.”

I didn't even approach her but went to find my wife (“Come and look. You're not going to believe this”) so as to have a reality check on what I thought I was seeing. Reassured it was indeed she, we then went up to her. She was *en route* to India for some sort of World Conference on some

sort of World Problem, had gone to where we were permanently staying, found out where we had gone, had walked in on her notoriously bad ankles in the mid-day heat to find us. She apologized: She knew anthropologists don't like other anthropologists to intrude into their field sites. She had come only to invite us to dinner, three days hence, in the island capital, where there was a local Javanese art dealer married to a Balinese, whom she had known for years and whom it would be good for us to meet. We accepted. She departed, hobbling back to the main road where her car was waiting. The dinner was as useful as promised; and, by the then deserted Sanur beach (Sukarno was about to throw the Dutch out and virtually all Europeans had left the island), Margaret quietly asking, the art dealer even more quietly answering, we silently listening, strange and beautiful.

The cliché with which memorials of this sort used ritually to end was, "We shall not look upon her like again." For my part, I am absolutely astonished (and wildly grateful) that she ever existed in the first place. So, too, the field should be.

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