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GEORGE PETER MURDOCK

1897—1985

A Biographical Memoir by
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Biographical Memoir

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George P. Murdock

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BY WARD H. GOODENOUGH

GEORGE PETER MURDOCK played a peculiarly important role in the history of anthropology, to whose development he was a major contributor in the middle years of the twentieth century.¹ He laid the foundations for systematic cross-cultural research and the cross-cultural testing of generalizations about human society and culture, and in his own work exemplified the value of such research and testing. He remained active until shortly before his death, publishing his last two monographs in 1980 and 1981, the latter when he was eighty-three years old. His work was not readily accepted by many of his fellow anthropologists and was the object of hostile criticism from some while being praised by others. But his critics had to reckon with his work, and many of them found, in the end, that their own contributions grew significantly out of it, thereby underscoring the importance of his role in the growth of his discipline. He contributed not only intellectually but also as an organizer, providing leadership in the creation of the Human Relations Area Files, Inc., and in the promotion and funding of anthropological research in the Pacific region.

Murdock grew up on a prosperous farm in Meriden, Connecticut, the eldest of three children of George Bronson Murdock and Harriet Elizabeth Graves. He was a seventh

generation descendant of Peter Murdock, who came to Long Island from Scotland in 1690. Murdock's parents were politically Democratic, individualistic, and agnostic in religion, an outlook that remained with him all his life. They regarded education and the cultivation of knowledge as the proper pathway to personal and social fulfillment and fostered Murdock's education accordingly, sending him to Phillips Academy, Andover, and then to Yale University, where he graduated with honors in history in 1919. He took leave from Yale to serve as a member of the National Guard in the Mexican border incident of 1916 and, again, as a second lieutenant of artillery in World War I. A devoted tennis player most of his life, he competed in the national tournament at Forest Hills in 1919.

After graduating from Yale, Murdock went to study law at Harvard. He found it unrewarding and in his second year, dropped out of law and spent more than a year traveling around the world. By the time his travels were over, he had decided to pursue anthropology, and enrolled in a combined program of anthropology and sociology under Albert G. Keller at Yale, where he received his Ph.D. in 1925. In that year, also, he married Carmen Emily Swanson, with whom he had a son, Robert. Encouraged by Keller, Murdock did a critical translation of Julius Lippert's *Kulturgeschichte der Menschheit in ihrem organischen Aufbau* in abridged form for his doctoral dissertation, which he later published as *Evolution of Culture* (1931).

After teaching sociology and anthropology at the University of Maryland for two years, Murdock returned to Yale in 1928 as an assistant professor in Keller's department, which later became the department of sociology. He received a joint appointment in 1931 in Yale's newly formed anthropology department and became fully affiliated with it in 1938, when he became its chairman. He was promoted to

full professor in 1939 and remained at Yale for another twenty-one years. During World War II, he took leave to serve as lieutenant commander (1943-45) and commander (1945-46) in the U.S. Naval Reserve. In 1960 he accepted appointment as Andrew Mellon Professor of social anthropology at the University of Pittsburgh. After retiring from there in 1973 at age seventy-five, he and Carmen moved to Wynnewood, Pennsylvania, in suburban Philadelphia, to be near their only child, Robert, and his family. They remained there until Carmen's death, after which Murdock moved to a retirement home in nearby Devon, where he died.

Murdock's scientific career was marked by a remarkable consistency. From his boyhood love of geography came a lasting interest in ethnography on a world-wide basis, in the knowledge of which he was without equal. He did not accept the theories of Sumner and Keller in regard to social evolution, but he shared their conviction that a scientific approach to the study of society and culture required systematic comparative, cross-cultural study. Much of his career was devoted to creating organized data archives intended to establish a solid foundation for such study.

In this, as in everything else he did, Murdock sought to bring better order to the enormous mass of ethnographic information and to the many conflicting and competing generalizations, hypotheses, and typologies that anthropologists were continually generating but failing to test empirically in a rigorous way. He seemed compelled to bring tidiness to things so that the problems could be clarified, and what needed to be done could be more clearly seen and progress made in the accumulation and improvement of knowledge.

Changing fashions in intellectual posture did not appeal to Murdock except as they demonstrably led to new kinds of verifiable knowledge. He did not try to create new theory

on a grand scale. Rather, he critically evaluated and selected from the theoretical contributions of others in anthropology and related disciplines with an eye to their utility in advancing anthropology as a scientific enterprise. He evaluated that utility against the evidence provided by linguistics, archaeology, and clinical and experimental psychology, and, especially, ethnography. How to organize and use that evidence effectively seemed to be a major preoccupation. For his multi-disciplinary perspective he owed much to fellow members of Yale's Institute of Human Relations: John Dollard (personality theory and psychoanalysis), Clark Hull (psychology), and Neal Miller (psychology). Others to whose work he gave credit as significantly influencing his own included the linguists Edward Sapir and Joseph Greenberg, and the anthropologists W. H. R. Rivers, Robert Lowie, Leslie Spier, Ralph Linton, and Fred Eggan.²

He did not make advances, himself, in descriptive ethnography, but he valued developments by others in ethnographic method and data analysis that advanced knowledge of culture and society and that improved the quality of the data base on which comparative study relied. Murdock held his students to the highest standards in the conduct of their own ethnographic research and inspired in them a concern for research method. At the same time, he did not ask his students to be clones of himself. He sought to find what it was that interested them and what ideas they had about it. If he thought it worthwhile, he then encouraged them to pursue it. He asked only that they convince him of its value. Murdock's broad interest in the behavioral and social sciences generally allowed him to see value in a wide range of subjects. He hoped to learn from his students. The one stricture was that whatever it was they did, they must do it to the best of their capability. He assessed their respective capabilities and judged their performances accordingly.

In keeping with his interests, Murdock's first major work after completing his doctorate was *Our Primitive Contemporaries* (1934), a book of ethnographic summaries that was widely used for many years as a teaching text. The eighteen societies covered constituted a small, representative sample of the world's cultures. Murdock intended that it should be used in the classroom as a basis for evaluating generalizations about human societies that students were encountering in their readings.

The schedule of information Murdock created for extracting information for the summaries from the ethnographic sources became the basis for what he soon elaborated as *Outline of Cultural Materials* (1938), which in its several editions has served as a standard reference for indexing cultural materials and as a topical guide in ethnographic research. This later work was developed in connection with the ambitious project called the Cross-Cultural Survey, which Murdock set up at Yale's Institute for Human Relations in the mid-1930s. The social and behavioral scientists at the institute were committed to developing a general, unified theory of behavior. They concurred with Murdock that the creation of an organized body of data on human societies and cultures was an essential resource for constructing and critically evaluating such a theory, and strongly supported the project.

The Cross-Cultural Survey was reorganized after World War II by a consortium of universities, under Murdock's leadership, as the Human Relations Area Files, Incorporated (HRAF), for expanding, up-grading, and making more generally available for research this data archive. Over forty years later, HRAF continues to serve the scientific community from its offices in New Haven.³

The effort to create and use the "Files," as the archive came to be known, was extraordinarily revealing of uneven-

ness both in ethnographic coverage geographically and topically, and in the quality of information relating to the topics that were commonly covered. Good comparability sought by the Files' users was conspicuously lacking, except for a few subjects relating to social organization. Even here, the quality of description was very uneven. The Files thus exposed to critical examination the quality of what anthropologists had been doing as ethnographers. Resulting concern to improve the quality of the ethnographic data base led to major advances in ethnographic method, and to considerable rethinking and refining of the categories in terms of which data are reported and generalized. This concern also contributed to the development of protocols for enhancing comparability of ethnographic data.⁴

The comparative studies the HRAF files facilitated also contributed significantly to rethinking and refining concepts. A major contribution in this regard was Murdock's landmark work *Social Structure* (1949). Using a sample of 250 cultures, he formulated and tested what continues to be the most carefully worked out theory of the determinants of the culturally different modes of kinship classification and descent reckoning.

Social Structure laid to rest a number of issues that had been debated by students of family and kinship in the first half of the century. At the same time, Murdock's refinement of concepts and the increased order he brought to the subject led to recognition of new problems. It led colleagues to see a need for further refinement of concepts and to recognize hitherto overlooked forms of social organization, such as those involving non-unilinear (or cognatic) descent groups. Murdock, himself, joined actively in this development, editing the important volume *Social Structure in Southeast Asia* (1960), in which he sought to update his earlier formulations in an introductory essay. His contribu-

tion to this critical re-examination of concepts is also illustrated by his paper "The Kindred" (1964). The rethinking and refining in this area that Murdock's work so signally stimulated continues forty years later.⁵

The lack of good text and reference materials to introduce students to the cultures of major regions of the world with attention to their differences and similarities also concerned Murdock. In his ethnography courses he would take a region, such as North America or Africa, and with his students try to compile a comprehensive picture and appraise the quality of information available. His book *Africa* (1959) grew out of such a course. It drew heavy fire from Africanists for errors of detail and interpretation, but they could not ignore it. Their efforts at correction led not to dismissal of the framework of order he sought to bring to African ethnology, but to its modification and improvement. Indeed, it placed the anthropological view of Africa's peoples and cultures in a distinctly new perspective that has significantly influenced the work of Africanists since.⁶

Murdock abandoned his plan to write similar comprehensive books on North and South America, saying that he found the complexities there too great. But preliminary work to this end led to the *Ethnographic Bibliography of North America* (1941), the *Outline of South American Cultures* (1951), and papers on South American culture areas (1951) and social organization in North America (1955). The bibliography of North America, subsequently co-authored and greatly expanded by Timothy O'Leary into a five-volume fourth edition (1975), remains the most important reference for students and researchers, as do Murdock's codings of a large number of cultural variables for 218 North American societies.⁷

Finding his cross-cultural research demands running ahead of the resources being made available through the Human

Relations Area Files, Murdock undertook to code a much larger sample of the world's cultures in regard to matters of interest to cultural and behavioral theorists. To this end the Cross-Cultural Cumulative Coding Center was established at the University of Pittsburgh with Murdock as its director from 1968 to 1973. Results of this work appeared in final form, after several preliminary versions, as *Atlas of World Cultures* (1981), his last publication. The further development of data bases for comparative research is being continued by former students.⁸

Creating tools for cross-cultural research was not enough. Murdock felt it essential to demonstrate their usefulness. To this end, in addition to *Social Structure*, mentioned above, he published the results of a number of other comparative studies, ranging over such topics as the social regulation of sexual behavior, family stability, parental attitudes, parental kin terms, the distribution of kin term patterns, cross-sex kin behavior, and the division of labor by sex. His final comparative study was a global survey of theories of illness and their regional distributions (1980). A lasting legacy of his work that is invaluable to social and behavioral scientists is the growing accumulation he set in motion of tested cross-cultural findings.⁹

Murdock's comparative studies stimulated much debate about the methodological and conceptual issues they highlighted. One set of issues had to do with sampling and the units to be sampled. Another had to do with the problem of how to relate concepts appropriate to the description of particular cultures, involving cultural relativity, with concepts appropriate to the comparison of cultures, which had to remain constantly applicable across cultures. This consequence of Murdock's work is prominent in current debates in anthropology.¹⁰

Murdock also put much energy into stimulating research

to fill major gaps in ethnographic information and into publication of the results of such research for their value as data and not just as a context for theoretical argument. To the latter end, he helped establish *Ethnology* at the University of Pittsburgh in 1962, a journal that quickly acquired international acclaim and that he edited for the next ten years. Out of his wartime work with the Navy he saw a need for a concerted effort to update and improve information on the peoples of Micronesia in the Western Pacific. With Harold Coolidge, he organized the Pacific Science Board within the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences and obtained for the Board funding from the Office of Naval Research for the Coordinated Investigation of Micronesian Anthropology (CIMA), a project that took forty-two anthropologists and linguists from more than twenty institutions to do field research in 1947-48. Murdock, himself, led the research group that went to Truk.

There were important sequels to CIMA. For almost a decade thereafter anthropologists were included on the administrative staff of the U.S. Trust Territory. The researches CIMA began have continued unabated to a point where Micronesia is now one of the best described areas of the Pacific. Another sequel of CIMA was the program of ecological studies of atolls, including human and cultural ecology, by the Pacific Science Board while Murdock served actively on it and while he was its chairman from 1953 to 1957. At the same time he promoted formation of a consortium of the Bishop Museum and the anthropology departments of Yale and the University of Hawaii in the Tri-Institutional Pacific Program (TRIPP). From 1953 until 1964 it supported ethnographers, linguists, and archaeologists in what were judged to be critically needed and hitherto neglected areas of study. This program, too, has a legacy of continuing research.

In addition to these activities, Murdock served as president in 1947 of the Society of Applied Anthropology, a society he helped found. He was president of the American Ethnological Society in 1952–53 and of the American Anthropological Association in 1955. He played a major role in creating the Society for Cross-Cultural Research in 1972. After his election to the National Academy of Sciences in 1964, he chaired the Division of Behavioral Sciences of the National Research Council until 1968. He was also influential in bringing linguists and social scientists into the Academy, where they had not been represented before.

In recognition of his contributions he was awarded the Viking Fund Medal in 1949, the Herbert E. Gregory Medal of the Pacific Science Association in 1966, the Wilbur Lucius Cross Medal in 1967, and the Huxley Medal of the Royal Anthropological Institute in 1971. He was also honored in 1964 with a large Festschrift volume containing major papers by twenty-four former students.¹¹

In an obituary article Alexander Spoehr observed, "Murdock's long career spanned the coming of age of American anthropology. In the fifty years between his first professional publication in 1931 and his last in 1981, he played a leading role in anthropology's growth, development, and maturity."¹²

So, indeed, he did.

NOTES

1. This memoir draws heavily on two other biographical pieces by the author: "George Peter Murdock," in *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, vol. 18, *Biographical Supplement* (New York: The Free Press, 1979):554–59, and "George Peter Murdock's Contributions to Anthropology: An Overview," in *Behavior Science Research*, 22(1988):1–9. See also Alexander Spoehr, "George Peter

Murdock (1897–1985),” in *Ethnology*, 24(1985):307–17, and John W. M. Whiting, “George Peter Murdock (1897–8195),” in *American Anthropologist*, 88(1986):682–86. The first of my two pieces and that by Spoehr provide fuller bibliographies of Murdock’s work. Much more information on Murdock’s family background and early years is contained in his “Autobiographical Sketch” in a collection of his papers entitled *Culture & Society* (1965).

2. See Murdock’s “Autobiographical Sketch” in *Culture & Society* (1965). In an unpublished biographical statement he also listed as influential former students: Harold Conklin, William Davenport, C. S. Ford, Charles Frake, Ward H. Goodenough, Allen Holmberg, Raymond Kennedy, William E. Lawrence, Floyd G. Lounsbury, Leopold Pospisil, and John W. M. Whiting.

3. Melvin Ember, “The Human Relations Area Files: Past and Future,” in *Behavior Science Research*, 22(1988):97–104.

4. See, for example, Beatrice B. Whiting, ed., *Six Cultures: Studies on Child Rearing* (New York: Wiley, 1963).

5. See, for example, William H. Davenport, “George Peter Murdock’s Classification of ‘Consanguineal Kin Groups,’” in *Behavior Science Research*, 22(1988):10–22, and John W. M. Whiting, M. L. Burton, A. K. Romney, C. C. Moore, and D. R. White, “A Reanalysis of Murdock’s Model for *Social Structure* Based on Optimal Scaling,” in *Behavior Science Research*, 22(1988):23–40.

6. See the assessment by Igor Kopytoff, “George Peter Murdock’s Contributions to African Studies,” in *Behavior Science Research*, 22(1988):41–49.

7. Joseph C. Jorgensen, “George Peter Murdock’s Contributions to the Ethnology of Native North America,” in *Behavior Science Research*, 22(1988):50–58.

8. Douglas R. White and Lilyan A. Brudner-White, “The Murdock Legacy: The Ethnographic Atlas and the Search for a Method,” in *Behavior Science Research*, 22(1988):59–81.

9. See the compilation of David Levinson, ed., *A Guide to Social Theory: Worldwide Cross-Cultural Tests*, 5 vols. (New Haven: Human Relations Area Files, 1977), and the important review of it by Guy E. Swanson, “In the Tradition of Murdock,” in *Contemporary Sociology*, 9(1980):376–80.

10. As illustrated by Peggy Sanday, “Toward Thick Comparison and a Theory of Self-Awareness,” *Behavior Science Research*, 22 (1988):82–96.

11. Ward H. Goodenough, ed., *Explorations in Cultural Anthropology: Essays in Honor of George Peter Murdock* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964). Of the twenty-four former students who contributed to this volume, nine have been elected to the National Academy of Sciences.

12. Alexander Spoehr, "George Peter Murdock (1897-1985)," in *Ethnology*, 24(1985):313.

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