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ROBERT HARRY LOWIE

1883—1957

A Biographical Memoir by JULIAN H. STEWARD

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Biographical Memoir

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Fotat A. Lowie

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June 12, 1883-September 21, 1957

BY JULIAN H. STEWARD

ROBERT LOWIE was one of the key figures in the history of anthropology. His professional years spanned the first five decades of the present century. He entered anthropology not long after Franz Boas had established it as an academic discipline and had removed it from the rather philosophical study of the nineteenth century and placed it on an empirical, scientific basis. Although Lowie was initially employed for a few years by the American Museum of Natural History, his true niche was as a university scholar where his influence reached an increasing number of students as well as those who read his large number of publications.

Lowie's principal interests were in ethnological theory, including the history of such theory, and in social organization, especially kinship, marriage, the family, kinship terminology, men's and women's societies including age-grade societies, and political and social organization. He also made major contributions to the study of primitive religion and folklore. Lowie did not do original research on physical anthropology or archaeology, which were little developed during his active years, and he did not have a major interest in language.

There is a major fallacy, which seems to be shared by some members of the National Academy of Sciences, that archaeology is a "hard" science, thus ranking as more of a science than ethnology, because it deals with visible and measurable material objects. Lowie, however, directed ethnology by the most rigorous scientific criteria, which generally outstripped those formerly held by archaeology.

THE MAKING OF AN ETHNOLOGIST

Robert Lowie was born on June 12, 1883, in Vienna of a Hungarian father and a Viennese mother. His family came to New York City when he was ten years old where his father earned a living in merchandizing, but where Robert was reared in the German-Jewish intellectual tradition of lower Manhattan. Although he never adhered to Jewish orthodoxy, the ties of the Jewish family were so strong and Lowie was so close to his mother and sister that he did not marry until he had passed the age of forty. According to the cultural values of the community and family in which he was reared, Lowie always expected to make a career in the intellectual world. He attended the City College of New York and he resided among liberals in Greenwich Village. After graduation he engaged in schoolteaching for several years but found this distasteful and, to his mind, largely futile. He had once considered a career in chemistry but abandoned it upon discovering that he was color-blind and also gave up any laboratory plans because of an extraordinary ineptitude in handling physical objects. Many years later he learned to drive an automobile but always drove at great peril, and all his confrontations with material objects of the simplest kind were major contests.

Lowie was attracted to anthropology because it represented intellectual fulfillment without the difficulties of physical manipulation of objects. He was also no doubt attracted to it because Boas represented a liberal point of view and had devoted himself to fighting the prejudices directed toward Jews and other ethnic and racial minorities as well as toward the teaching of anthropology. Lowie never became a political activist but his sympathies were definitely on the liberal side and he wrote extensively on racist problems.

Lowie taught in the New York public school system from 1901, when he was graduated from the City College of New York, until 1904, when he entered Columbia University as a graduate student to study anthropology under Franz Boas. He took his Ph.D. degree in 1907 and was appointed to the staff of the American Museum of Natural History.

At that time it was assumed that Boas's students should obtain their ethnological data from firsthand fieldwork rather than, as had been the case in previous decades, from secondary sources written by explorers, missionaries, and other nontrained people. It is remarkable that Lowie, city-bred and little experienced outside New York City, should have done so much of his fieldwork in areas that were extremely remote and extraordinarily difficult for one with urban habits to live in. His first fieldwork was done among the Lemhi Shoshoni of Idaho in 1906, and his second major field trip took him into Canada to study the Chipewayan Indians at Lake Athabaska in the Arctic drainage. In a little book entitled Robert H. Lowie, Ethnologist: A Personal Record (1959), Lowie recounts in detail the adventures of this trip. He traveled by train, then crossed the watershed downstream in fur traders' barges, and it was only through the kindly help of the trappers toward a person so obviously helpless in the face of the circumstances he encountered that he was able to survive the trip in reasonable safety. The final crisis came on his return trip when the railroad was surrounded and threatened by a forest fire, when again his fellow travelers guided him through his difficulties to safety.

Lowie did not pursue subarctic ethnology further, but in 1912 and 1915 he visited other Shoshonean tribes of the Great Basin, some of them so remote from the white settlers that he could not find English-speaking interpreters. His contributions to Great Basin Shoshonean ethnology, however, were the first, and for many years the only, sources on the area.

While he was associated with the American Museum of Natural History, his interests and fieldwork were largely directed by Clark Wissler, whose main area was the Indians of the Great Plains. Lowie visited and studied many of the tribes but his principal and lasting interest was the Crow, about whom he published a definitive book, *The Crow Indians* (1935).

During 1917–1918 Lowie was invited to become visiting lecturer in anthropology at the University of California at Berkeley by A. L. Kroeber, who had founded the department fifteen years earlier. In 1921, Lowie was appointed a permanent member of the staff at Berkeley and remained such until his retirement, although he held many visiting professorships and lectureships.

Lowie's interest in primitive peoples expanded in scope through voluminous reading, and his bibliography contains some 200 book reviews. His knowledge of South American Indians was stimulated by the visit to Berkeley in 1927 of Baron Erland Nordenskiöld, who until that time was virtually the only ethnologist to have worked with the South American Indians. A few years later, Lowie happened to discover a German-born resident of Brazil, Curt Nimuendajú. This remarkable man had visited some of the least known tribes in eastern Brazil, the Ge-speaking Indians, and had written extremely full manuscripts on their culture. Lowie translated these into English. His interest in the general area became a lasting one, such that he was a major contributor to, and editor of, the Tropical Forest volume of the Handbook of South American Indians.

During his life, he held office in many scientific societies and accepted appointments as visiting professor at many universities, including Ohio State, Yale, Columbia, Harvard, Washington, and Hamburg. He was granted honorary membership in such societies as the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain, the Instituto do Cerara in Brazil, the American Philosophical Society, the New York Academy of Science, the Würtembergische Verein für Handelsgeographie, the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Völkerkund, the Société Suisse des Americanistes, and the Bavaria Academy of Science. He was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Chicago and received the Viking Medal. He was twice appointed editor of the *American Anthropologist* and served for a year as chairman of the Division of Anthropology and Psychology of the National Research Council. He was elected to the National Academy of Sciences in 1931.

ROBERT LOWIE'S SCIENTIFIC ACHIEVEMENTS

In order to understand the very great importance of Lowie's scientific work, it is necessary to consider the profound transition in anthropological thinking between the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. After Darwin had liberated biology from the restrictions of the concept of the original creation of each species, anthropological studies soon adopted a kind of Darwinism for cultural origins. The concept was not entirely unique at this time, but it soon became formulated around the orthogenic and philosophical idea that cultures tended to progress from the simple to the complex through a series of worldwide stages that could be identified by specific criteria everywhere. The universal evolutionary scheme that became known as unilinear evolution was most completely expounded by Lewis H. Morgan in Ancient Society. Morgan classed all civilizations, including all surviving societies, into three principal stages and subdivisions thereof, known as savagery, barbarism, and civilization, the last epitomized by the achievements of the Victorian era. Specific criteria of material culture and society were alleged to characterize each of these stages.

Morgan's supporting data for his universal scheme were

drawn from miscellaneous sources rather than from direct fieldwork. When Franz Boas, Lowie's teacher, began his direct fieldwork in 1890 and after beginning his teaching at Columbia University at the turn of the century, he advocated an empirical approach to the question of the characteristics of each culture. Gradually, the nineteenth-century scheme was thrown into doubt, although James Frazer's Golden Bough perpetuated it into the 1920s. Lowie's outstanding contribution to anthropology, it seems to me, was to subject Morgan's scheme to minute empirical criticism based on the accumulated data of fieldwork, and in his Primitive Society (1920) he gave the entire idea the coup de grâce. I consider this to be Lowie's most important work, albeit a task that could not be repeated, because once an erroneous theory is demolished the job cannot and need not be repeated. At the same time Lowie thereby cleared the ground for new studies about the nature and origins of various traits of culture to which he himself contributed in large measure in Primitive Society and also in subsequent papers and books such as The Origin of the State, Primitive Religion, and studies on the origins of various forms of social organization.

Lowie pursued basic studies of kinship and fictitious kinship groups in his comparative research on clans, phratries, and moieties. In his theoretical treatment of these social divisions he avoided the general tendency of anthropologists of the early twentieth century to assume a single origin and diffusion, though his theory of multiple origins did not revert to the unilinear theory of the previous century.

In these studies he drew heavily upon the data of the Great Plains, whose tribes had been the subject of much of his own research as well as that of the American Museum of Natural History, and where men's societies were often arranged in agegrades. For comparative material he drew also upon the Hopi, among whom he had done fieldwork. Lowie's research, which examined theoretical approaches to phenomena of social and political organization, led him to write a very useful little book called *The History of Ethnological Theory*, published in 1937.

Another of Lowie's major theoretical interests was treated in his book *The Origin of the State* (1927). The nineteenthcentury evolutionists had sought reasons for the origin of various social and political phenomena, though few had subscribed to a universal or evolutionary scheme comparable in scope to that of L. H. Morgan. Lowie had suggested various theories concerning the origin of the family, kinship groups, and forms of society and had given them critical scrutiny. In *The Origin of the State* he did the same for this subject, repudiating the theory of a single cause of all origins and pointing to the complexity of the problem. Curiously, despite the subsequent interest in the development of states, there has been very little theoretical contribution to the subject.

Lowie was also greatly interested in legends and folklore, that is, in folk tales rather than in folklore in the European sense. His treatment of the varieties of religious experiences in his *Primitive Religion* (1924 and 1948) was not primarily critical of nineteenth-century thinking and for this reason, perhaps, had less impact on contemporary thought.

In his extraordinarily candid self-appraisal written for the National Academy of Sciences, Lowie pointed to his comparatively meager treatment of material culture, that is, technology and material manufactures, as a regrettable omission in his life's work. He was not uninformed about primitive technology and in fact eventually described it for the Plains Indians, especially his beloved Crow. This knowledge was incorporated finally in his book *The Crow Indians* (1935).

Over the years the American Museum of Natural History had issued a series of area-oriented handbooks that were intended primarily as guides to the museum exhibits. The Plains Indian culture, with which the museum had been so greatly concerned under Clark Wissler, and for which Wissler had prepared the museum guide, was the subject of the hand-book rewritten by Lowie in 1954.

During World War II and subsequently, anthropology became reoriented and enlarged its scope of interest. From primitive societies it first embraced acculturated people and finally societies of the contemporary world. Lowie had been little interested in Indian acculturation, though he had written occasionally on the subject, but his major contributions at this time were on German culture, which he knew very thoroughly through lifelong contacts with and frequent visits to Germany. He published a book called *The German People* in 1945 and another entitled *Toward Understanding Germany* in 1954. This abrupt departure from the conventional type of anthropology preceded by nearly twenty years comparable works by his colleagues that dealt with the modern world, and his books provided deep insights that only a person like Lowie could recognize.

Among Lowie's miscellaneous works was a book called Are We Civilized? published in 1929. This book, which was based upon many obscure sources dealing with European customs and practices of the last few centuries, was intended to draw attention to the artificiality of the concept that modern European cultures are intrinsically superior to those of primitive peoples. It was written in a humorous vein, though it did not, as Lowie had hoped, become a best-seller. This book illustrates the humorous strain in Lowie which was otherwise evident only when, to make a point in a lecture, he might perform a Crow war dance.

Many persons found Lowie somewhat difficult to approach, owing to a façade of apparent pomposity and possibly even conceit, but once his friendship was gained he was undeviatingly

loyal and his generosity in giving of himself and offering encouragement was inexhaustible.

When a new anthropology building, which had been Kroeber's lifelong ambition, was finally built at the University of California at Berkeley, it was officially named the Robert H. Lowie Museum of Anthropology. This museum, together with the Museum of Art, was part of the A. L. Kroeber Hall, but the honor paid Lowie was especially significant in that Lowie was never identified with or personally attracted to museum work. His early connections with the American Museum of Natural History were mainly a means whereby he had the opportunity to do fieldwork under the direction of Clark Wissler, and he relinquished this job in 1921 to accept the more congenial role of Professor of Anthropology at the University of California.

Several appreciations of Lowie were published shortly after his death, which occurred on September 21, 1957. These are:

Paul Radin, American Anthropologist, 60 (1958):358-75.

A. L. Kroeber, Year Book of the American Philosophical Society, 1957:141-45, and Sociologus, 8 (1958):1-3.

Ermine Wheeler-Vogelin, Journal of American Folklore, 71 (1958):149-50.

In 1966 the Robert H. Lowie Museum of Anthropology published *The Complete Bibliography of Robert H. Lowie* with an introduction by Alan Dundes.

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KEY TO ABBREVIATIONS

Am. Anthropol. = American Anthropologist

- Am. Antiquity = American Antiquity
- Am. J. Psychiatry = American Journal of Psychiatry
- Am. J. Sociol. = American Journal of Sociology
- Am. Mercury = American Mercury
- Am. Mus. J. = American Museum Journal
- Anthropol. Linguistics = Anthropological Linguistics
- Anthropol. Pap. Am. Mus. Nat. Hist. = Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History
- Anthropol. Quart. = Anthropological Quarterly
- Current Anthropol. Lit. = Current Anthropological Literature
- J. Am. Folklore = Journal of American Folklore
- Nat. Hist. = Natural History
- New Repub. = New Republic
- New Rev. = New Review
- Proc. Internat. Congr. Americanists = Proceedings of the ------International Congress of Americanists
- Psychol. Bull. = Psychological Bulletin
- Sci. Monthly = Scientific Monthly
- S.W. J. Anthropol. = Southwestern Journal of Anthropology
- Univ. Calif. Publ. Am. Archaeol. Ethnol. = University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology
- Z. Ethnol. = Zeitschrift für Ethnologie

Several bibliographies of Robert Lowie have been published, the most recent and fullest being *The Complete Bibliography of Robert H. Lowie*, with an Introduction by Alan Dundes, published by the Robert H. Lowie Museum of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley, 1966. The present publications are taken from this, but do not include many items that were reprinted or that deal with nonanthropological subjects.

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