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JOHN MILTON ROBERTS

*1916—1990*

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*A Biographical Memoir by*  
WARD H. GOODENOUGH

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*Biographical Memoir*

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*John M. Rolato*

## JOHN MILTON ROBERTS

*December 8, 1916–April 2, 1990*

BY WARD H. GOODENOUGH

JOHN ROBERTS, “JACK” to all who knew him,<sup>1</sup> has been justly characterized as “one of the most brilliant and creative anthropologists of the second half of the twentieth century.”<sup>2</sup> His brilliance and creativity were not only in anthropology, in the prevailing understanding of that term, but more broadly in behavioral science. He had a penchant for looking at things that others thought unimportant or took for granted and for coming up with intriguing insights and discoveries, at times with profound implications for anthropological and social psychological theory, at other times with equally profound implications for the practical conduct of human affairs.

Roberts was intrigued by problems that seemed too “messy” to most social scientists and not easily amenable to systematic data gathering, quantification, or rigorous analysis. Thus, although experimental in his approach, his work was largely in relation to subjects where carefully controlled experiments were often impossible and where the kinds of cultural and societal data available were far from adequate for controlled comparison. Creative in this as in other respects, Roberts relied on the approach that examines an idea in relation to several independent lines of evidence, where

evidence in any one line is not in itself conclusive. He was convinced that support for an idea from several such lines could be as compelling, cumulatively, as support from a single, beautifully contrived and controlled experiment.

He was a "consummate collaborator" and published more often than not as coauthor with colleagues "on an extremely wide variety of topics and on numerous cultures, always drawing upon and drawing out the expertise of his coworkers."<sup>3</sup> His colleagues valued him highly for his intriguingly different ways of looking at things that so often provided productive veins for them to mine in their own research.

Roberts was born in Omaha, Nebraska, the only child of John M. Roberts, senior, and Ruth Kohler, his father's second wife. He had a much older half brother and half sister. His father, a highway engineer, moved the family to Lincoln, when Roberts was a year old, and it was there that he grew up and went to school, taking his A.B. degree at the University of Nebraska with distinction in 1937. He did not find the study of law at the University of Chicago congenial and left it after one quarter in the fall of 1937. He switched to anthropology, which he continued at the University of Chicago for two more quarters in 1938 and 1939, when he transferred to Yale. While there he studied with G. P. Murdock, B. Malinowski, C. S. Ford, and John Dollard, among others, and worked under Murdock as research assistant on the Cross-Cultural Survey (which became the Human Relations Area Files, Inc., after World War II).

His studies were interrupted in February 1942, when he was called up as a captain in the U.S. Army Reserve, less than a year after his marriage to Marie Louise Kotouc of Lincoln, Nebraska. In World War II, he commanded a company of infantry in northern France and was awarded the Silver Star for gallantry in action and the Bronze Star for meritorious service. He returned to Yale in November 1945,

left for fieldwork among the Navaho in February 1946, and received his Ph.D. in 1947.

After one year as assistant professor of anthropology at the University of Minnesota, Roberts went, still as assistant professor, to Harvard's Department of Social Relations in 1948. He was also a research associate in the Laboratory of Social Relations and an assistant curator in the Peabody Museum. At Harvard, he was made coordinator of the project called *The Comprehensive Study of Values in Five Cultures*, which carried out field research from 1949 to 1953 in Zuni, Navaho, Spanish-American, Mormon, and Texan Homesteader communities in western New Mexico. This program was under the overall direction of Clyde and Florence Kluckhohn, who had already conducted long-range field research with the Ranch Navaho. Roberts' own research at that time was mainly with the Zuni.

From Harvard he went to the University of Nebraska in 1953, as associate professor, and went from there to Cornell University as professor in 1955. Three years later his wife died suddenly, victim of a stroke, a severe blow to Roberts and their two daughters, Tania Marie and Andrea Louise. In 1961 he married Joan Marilyn Skutt, who brought new happiness to his life and with whom he had two sons, James Barton and John Milton, Jr. Roberts remained at Cornell until 1971, when he went to the University of Pittsburgh, succeeding his former teacher, G. P. Murdock, as Andrew W. Mellon Professor. While at Pittsburgh he was also appointed Adjunct Mellon Professor of Sociology in 1975. He retired from both positions in 1987.

Roberts was a fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences in 1956-57, taught at the Summer Seminar in Quantitative Anthropology at Williams College in 1966, and was acting chair of the Department of Anthropology at Cornell in 1966-67. He held the chair of com-

parative cultures, Naval War College, Newport, Rhode Island, in 1969-70. In the spring quarters of 1975 and 1984, he was visiting professor of anthropology at the University of California, San Diego, and in the spring quarter of 1987 he was visiting distinguished professor at the School of Social Sciences, University of California, Irvine.

Roberts was president of the American Ethnological Society (1960), the Northeastern Anthropological Association (1965-67), the Society for Cross-Cultural Research (1974-75), and the Association for the Anthropological Study of Play (1979-80). He was elected to the National Academy of Sciences in 1982, where he was to have served as chair of Section 51 (anthropology) for a three-year term (1990-93).

In 1989 Roberts was honored with the publication of a massive *Festschrift* volume containing twenty-eight papers by thirty-eight contributors.<sup>2</sup> They show clearly the breadth of Roberts's interest in and impact on the social and behavioral sciences.

In keeping with that breadth, Roberts's principal contributions to science were in several disparate areas. First among them was his contribution to the ethnography of the Navaho and Zuni. Of special importance for cultural theory was his Navaho work. Anthropologists had widely recognized individual and local differences in how people did things and understood things but had ignored such differences in regard to culture theory. Roberts was the first to undertake systematically to document cultural differences at the household level (1951) and to stimulate anthropological recognition that every social group at every level of societal organization had its own distinctive culture. Culture theory had to account not only for this variation but also the processes that kept it within limits through time. Roberts further documented such differences in his study of daily life in Zuni (1956).

The role of culture in the processing of information was another topic in which he pioneered, notably in "The Self-Management of Cultures" (1964). Not only did small groups differ culturally, individuals differed in their knowledge of and expertise in the culturally structured activities of the groups of which they were members, another of those self-evident and hence ignored truths whose significance Roberts documented in his papers on Butler County Eight Ball (1979, 1984), lathe craft (1987), and the humble game of tic-tac-toe (1965), so that it could no longer be ignored.

How people conducted themselves in their various activities was not only a matter of knowledge and expertise but, as in tic-tac-toe, also presumably a matter of personality differences, but its demonstration and implications remained to be documented. Using psychological tests that sorted people into those who are "high self-testers" against those who are not, Roberts showed how this personality difference affected performance in driving automobiles (1972), in the conduct of war games (1972), and in the posting of speed limits on highways (1972), with obvious practical implications for driver education, military command, and highway safety.

The studies of games and pastimes that Roberts undertook in collaboration with Brian Sutton-Smith and others are a major contribution in themselves. His paper with Arth and Bush on "Games in Culture" (1959) developed what is now recognized as the standard classification of games into those of physical skill, strategy, and chance. In many subsequent publications, especially with Sutton-Smith, Roberts showed how such games serve in all societies as models of different kinds of activities in real life, activities that differ in the kinds of roles they require of their participants in such things as competing successfully, accomplishing objectives while being loyal and obedient, and being willing to

make decisions with inadequate information and take responsibility for the consequences of those decisions. His collaborative researches into what he came to refer to as "expressive culture" also explored how activities involving music, hobbies, and riddles, similarly provide models of real-life situations through which people not only rehearse social roles but also find ways of managing the emotional conflicts that are associated with these roles. This work has, again, had practical implications for understanding the emotional bases for addiction to various kinds of games as different as football, poker, and bingo.

In his later years Roberts had begun, with Hugo Nutini, to study expressive behavior among Mexican aristocracy; and at the time of his death, he was about to undertake, with Garry Chick, a study of how work, leisure, and technological change were influencing the lives of machine shop workers in western Pennsylvania.<sup>3</sup> Funding for the latter had been approved by the National Science Foundation only a few weeks before Roberts's death. These projects, as well as many more that his work has inspired, go on after him.

We who knew him shall not forget the excitement he brought to the behavior science enterprise, his joy in exploring ideas, his generosity in sharing his ideas and letting others run with them, and the intellectual enrichment our discourse with him invariably gave us.

#### NOTES

1. I am indebted to Marilyn Skutt Roberts, Evan Z. Vogt, D. Fred Wendurff, and Garry Chick for information and helpful comments on an earlier draft of this memoir.

2. R. Bolton. *The Content of Culture: Constants and Variants. Studies in Honor of John M. Roberts*. New Haven, Connecticut: HRAF Press (1989).

3. G. Chick and H. G. Nutini. John Milton Roberts. *Anthropology Newsletter* 31(6):4-5.



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