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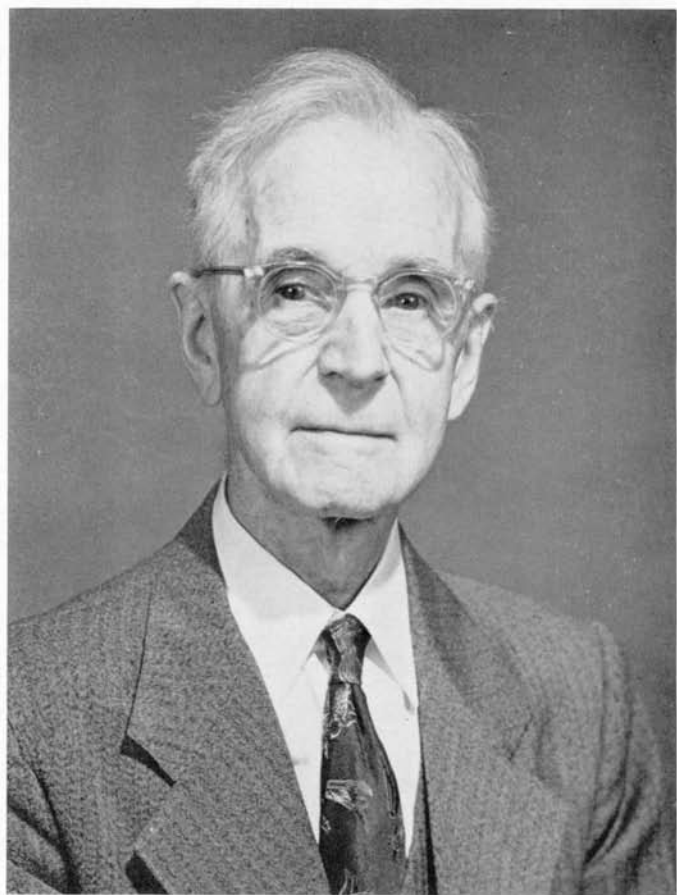
JOHN REED SWANTON
1873—1958

A Biographical Memoir by
JULIAN H. STEWARD

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Biographical Memoir

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WASHINGTON D.C.



John R. Swanton

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February 19, 1873–May 2, 1958

BY JULIAN H. STEWARD

JOHN REED SWANTON began his scientific career in 1900, when American anthropology was experiencing a radical transformation under the influence of Franz Boas. This was the period when the deductive nineteenth-century evolutionary theories came under attack and when a new, thoroughly empirical research methodology was being developed. It was also a time when anthropology was beginning to emerge as a fundamental academic discipline. Since Swanton's teachers and mentors were largely men who were qualified more because of their enthusiasm than because of formal training in anthropology, Swanton's application of the new inductive method was largely his own devising. His prodigious labors in studies of North American Indians, however, were without question the most thorough and successful substantive exemplification of twentieth-century anthropology of his time. His most important contributions were in the fields of ethnology, linguistics, and folklore, while his work in archaeology, though less well known, was by no means negligible.

Born after his father's death in the small town of Gardiner, Maine, John and his two brothers were reared in modest circumstances by his mother, grandmother, and great-aunt. This matriarchy, whose ancestors included several clergymen, stressed moral and religious values more than an intellectual life, although his mother managed to provide for his education through college. From his mother, especially, he acquired a lifelong devotion to the Swedenborgian faith,

a deep concern with human justice, and a rare gentleness and sweetness of character.

His dedication to anthropology developed from a childhood interest in geography and history. At the age of about ten, after reading several history books, he set out quite seriously to write a world history in a blank notebook. His interest in history was directed more specifically to anthropology when he read William H. Prescott's *Conquest of Mexico* and became fascinated by the exotic Aztec culture and by the mysteries of Mexican prehistory.

When Swanton entered Harvard in the mid-nineties, his course was pretty well set toward anthropology despite the very inadequate academic coverage then offered in the subject. "American Archaeology and Ethnology" had just been listed as a separate subject in the Harvard catalogue, but no regular courses were given. Professor Frederick W. Putnam and C. C. Willoughby of the Peabody Museum were Swanton's principal teachers, and they trained him especially in American archaeology. Ethnology was not systematically offered at Harvard until later when Swanton's fellow student, Roland B. Dixon, joined the staff, and comparative linguistics had not yet attained the status of a formal discipline. Swanton's anthropological training was supplemented by courses in geography under Professor William Morris Davis and in geology under Professor N. S. Shaler, from whom he acquired respect for the methodology of natural science, and by courses in philosophy under Professors Palmer, Santayana, and James which were important in terms of his own religious experiences.

Swanton's first research was participation in a number of archaeological investigations while he was still a student. This research was less a matter of preference than of opportunity for training, and Swanton had little part in publishing the results. Many of these excavations were directed toward the then-burning question of the antiquity of man in America. Swanton worked with C. C. Willoughby, whom he called a "self-made" archaeologist in the ancient "red paint culture" of Maine, with Ernest Volk on the early argillite

implements of the Trenton gravels, with several persons in Ohio sites, and with George Papper, the pioneer of southwestern archaeology, at Pueblo Bonito.

During his graduate work, he was rescued from the rather uncongenial immersion in museum study of bones and potsherds which followed excavations by the opportunity to study and work with Franz Boas and Livingston Farrand at Columbia University. These contacts not only gave him the opportunity to pursue ethnography and linguistics, especially among the Northwest Coast Indians, but more importantly they helped lay the foundation of his theoretical approach. He followed Boas's admonitions that societies should be understood through intensive field research in their concreteness and particularity rather than with reference to their supposed position in a preconceived evolutionary scheme that embraced all humanity.

Upon obtaining his Ph.D. degree from Harvard University in 1900, he joined the Bureau of American Ethnology of the Smithsonian Institution, where he remained until retirement in 1944. The Bureau served in large measure to determine his specific field of interest and to encourage a man of his temperament. Created by federal law in 1873 to provide understanding of the American Indians, who were still an important factor in the expanding frontiers of the United States, the Bureau became the leading research and publication institution for Americanist studies; and Swanton became the most distinguished member of its staff. But while the Bureau facilitated intensive research within its prescribed field, it was prohibited from working outside the hemisphere, which discouraged a wider range of area coverage. This is why Swanton's research was truly extraordinary in its depth and thoroughness of treatment of his specialized Americanist fields, yet limited in scope.

The Bureau was made to order for a man of Swanton's temperament. Extraordinarily shy and prone to digestive ailments, which he recognized as largely of nervous origin, he found the Bureau a retreat and refuge from the demands of a more public life. He did no teaching, and only rarely lectured. When bestowal of kudos forced

him to appear in public, as when the fruition of his historical research brought national honors in connection with the celebration of the four hundredth anniversary of the De Soto expedition, the occasions were truly terrifying ordeals. Even the gathering of a small group of his Smithsonian colleagues upon his retirement to express their personal affection and scientific esteem and to present him with an armchair and reading lamp was as embarrassing to him as it was heart-warming.

Swanton's earliest research for the Bureau was on the culture and languages of the Haida, Tlingit, and other Indians of the Northwest Coast of British Columbia and Alaska, where his association with Boas had first drawn him. Although overshadowed by his later studies of the Indians of the southern and southeastern United States, this work resulted in several major articles on language, ethnography, and folklore.

In addition to the substantive and analytic research on the Northwest Coast, during this period Swanton wrote several major theoretical works. These works were directed at the still widely-held nineteenth-century evolutionary hypothesis that the earliest human societies were based upon extended matrilineal kin groups and that the bilateral or nuclear family as known today and forms of patrilineal descent evolved comparatively late in human history. Swanton's "Social Organization of American Tribes," 1905, and "A Reconstruction of the Theory of Social Organization," 1906, showed beyond doubt that the family occurred among all of the simple, hunting-and-gathering North American tribes, who were among the most primitive people in the world, and that patrilineal descent occurred without regard to stage of development. His own research on the Northwest Coast had disclosed matrilineal clans and moieties among tribes that were fairly advanced. In later years, Swanton wrote occasional criticisms of the religious implications of such evolutionists as Tylor, Marrett, and Frazer, but polemics became secondary to his own substantive research.

Swanton's field of investigation shifted from the Northwest Coast

to Texas, Mississippi, and Oklahoma where the Indians were so near extinction that it was urgent to record their languages and culture before it was too late. His field was gradually extended to the Indians of the lower Mississippi Valley and the southeastern United States, including such tribes as the Choctaw, Chickasaw, Creek, Natchez, and others. He became the undisputed authority on this area.

Research in the southern United States led Swanton to become the first and for many years almost the only person to utilize to the fullest what is now called "ethnohistory." Since the Indian cultures of the southern United States had been disrupted by long white occupation, field research could provide only limited information. He began to delve into early Spanish, French, and English sources in order to reconstruct the identity, locations, cultural characteristics, and languages of the tribes. He culled these sources so thoroughly that the job is virtually done for all time; for ordinary purposes, one consults Swanton rather than the primary sources. Although other anthropologists had not ignored early European writings, it was not until the last two decades, when the Indian Claims cases demanded precise knowledge of the early condition of each tribe, that anthropologists, who served as expert witnesses in these cases, began to use the early documents with a thoroughness comparable to Swanton's; and it was not until 1955 that a national society of ethnohistory was founded. Swanton's first in ethnohistory is a measure of his scholarship.

The results of Swanton's studies of the southern United States are published in an impressive number of papers and monographs, and they are summed up in *The Indians of the Southeastern United States*, a 943-page Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin, 1946, which is one of the most important reference works ever written on a single culture area. More specialized monograph-length works include *Indian Tribes of the Lower Mississippi Valley and Adjacent Coast of the Gulf of Mexico*, 1911, *Early History of the Creek Indians and Their Neighbors*, 1922, *Social Organization and Social Usages of the Indians of the Creek Confederacy*, 1928, *Social and*

Religious Beliefs and Usages of the Chickasaw Indians, 1928, *Source Material for the Social and Ceremonial Life of the Choctaw Indians*, 1931, and *Source Material on the History and Ethnology of the Caddo Indians*, 1942.

None of these works were published commercially, and, so far as is known, Swanton never received a cent in direct payment for his writings.

While Swanton had had no special training in linguistics and disclaimed any particular aptitude for the subject, deferring constantly to the genius of the late Edward Sapir, his contributions to the analysis and classification of American Indian languages were no less important than his ethnohistorical research. Starting with his first publication in 1900, a 38-page paper on the "Morphology of the Chinook Verb," he wrote more than twenty works on North and Central American Indian languages. Several of these were on Northwest Coast languages, including Haida texts; some dealt with Siouan languages; others with the language of last survivors of a tribe, such as the Ofo; and many with major linguistic classifications, such as the Siouan, lower Mississippian, and southeastern groups. Among major linguistic publications are his joint work with Cyrus Thomas on *Indian Languages of Mexico and Central America*, 1911, his "Linguistic Position of the Tribes of Southern Texas and Northeastern Mexico," 1915, *A Structural and Lexical Comparison of the Tunica, Chitimacha, and Atakapa Languages*, 1919, "The Tunica Language," 1921, "The Tawasa Language," 1929, *A Dictionary of the Atakapa Language* (with Albert S. Gatschet), 1932, and *Linguistic Material from the Tribes of Southern Texas and Northeastern Mexico*, 1940.

In addition to the publications already mentioned, Swanton had contributed many articles to Frederick Hodge's *Handbook of American Indians* published in 1907 and 1910. He continued to assemble general information on the identification, numbers, location, and linguistic classification of North American Indians, and, more than forty years later, brought the *Handbook* up to date as a reference

work for the general reader in *The Indian Tribes of North America*, 1952.

His search for early documents bearing on Indians of the Southeast had led to an interest in Hernando De Soto, which brought about his appointment as chairman of a commission authorized by Congress to celebrate the four hundredth anniversary of the De Soto expedition in 1939-1943. His *Final Report of the United States De Soto Expedition Commission*, 1939, was a monumental work in history as well as ethnohistory.

Another incidental but important by-product of Swanton's work in the Southeast was his contribution to what was later called the "direct historic approach to archaeology." Since southeastern archaeology was little-known until fairly recently, there was much speculation concerning the so-called Mound Builders and other prehistoric occupants of the area. Swanton brought his knowledge of history to bear on this problem and helped show which archaeological cultures had and had not survived into the historic period; for example, in his "Creek Indians as Mound Builders," 1912.

Despite his extreme shyness, Swanton helped the growth of his profession in many practical ways. He was a founder of the American Anthropological Association, which he served as president for one year and as editor for many years. He was president of the Anthropological Society of Washington and the American Folklore Society, and vice-president of Section H of the A.A.A.S. He served on the Social Science Research Council and the National Research Council. He was elected to the Washington Academy of Sciences and the National Academy of Sciences (1932), was made Corresponding Member of the Société d'Anthropologie de Paris, and was appointed a member of the Cuban Orden Nacional de Mérito de Manuel de Céspedes with the rank of "Official." In 1913 he received the Second Loubat Prize for publications in ethnology. His tremendous contributions to historical anthropology were celebrated by his colleagues in the Smithsonian Institution by publication on his fortieth year with the Bureau of *Essays in Historical Anthropology of*

North America in Honor of John R. Swanton, Smithsonian Miscellaneous Collections, Vol. 100. In 1948 he was the third person to receive the Viking Fund Medal in General Anthropology, the highest honor that the American Anthropological Association can award.

Swanton's non-professional life was little-known to his professional colleagues, but his basic motivations and beliefs are very frankly stated in his "Autobiographical Notes." His adherence to the Swedenborgian religion, or the New Church or Church of the New Jerusalem, which he was taught by his mother, remained the crucial fact of his life. He found this faith congenial in contrast to some of the sterner orthodoxies of New England; for it taught "the continued existence of man after death in a life of active service," liberated him from the "abhorrent view" that after death man lay "prone in the ground waiting for a final 'judgment,'" and freed him from the belief in an "illogical and inconceivable tri-personal Deity." Swanton considered that his studies under William James "shattered the basis of mechanistic materialism" and provided philosophical justification for his religious values.

But there was a more specific feature of Swedenborgian teachings which had central importance to Swanton. Emanuel Swedenborg believed that he had had direct and free communication with the inhabitants of the spirit world. Owing to the rigors of his scientific training and his respect for empirical research, however, Swanton had rejected the claims of psychical research that mental telepathy, spirit communication, and the like were possible. This created a serious dilemma and inner conflict, and it caused Swanton to keep his opinions on religion to himself. He expressly attributed his life-long digestive troubles to the partial "mental withdrawal" this entailed.

The conflict was resolved by the researches of Dr. J. B. Rhine and other parapsychologists, which he considered to constitute such proof of extrasensory perceptions as to substantiate his religious convictions and to warrant his finally speaking out on the matter. After his retirement, his friends were a little astonished to receive a number

of mimeographed memorandums which did not proselytize but urgently admonished that they keep an open mind on the question of extrasensory perceptions. In his "Autobiographical Notes" he states that the parapsychological experiments do "not involve anything other than proof of mental powers other than those formerly recognized" in the research of earlier societies on psychical research and in the "experiences reported by many individuals of high standing and unimpeachable character." These show "manifestations of personality which, whether emanating from this world or from another, constitute a problem that has to be recognized. . . ." They make "it necessary to view in an entirely different light the experiences reported by Swedenborg who was not only eminent intellectually but of the highest moral character." He concluded "that Swedenborg's experiences were *psychologically* real at least. . . ."

Swanton's reticence had been that of a scientist who recognized that experimental evidence contradicted his beliefs. The final resolution of his own doubts was also based on the evidence of research. "I feel that the attitude of the majority of psychologists at the present day is not merely unscientific but caters to materialism, whether Marxian or other, and is a major threat to the higher evolution of mankind, spiritually, mentally, and even in the long run mechanically."

Swanton's life thus ran the full cycle. It began with a deep love of truth which he perceived religiously in terms of Swedenborgianism, with its doctrinaire assumptions about the spiritual nature of man and the universe, and scientifically in terms of the need for empirical knowledge. He followed science faithfully within its own terms. He accepted the theory of biological evolution and its consequences for fundamentalist religious thought, and later the modification of Newtonian physics by relativity and nuclear physics. His own scientific work was based upon the premise of the mutability of culture which followed Darwinism in the field of social science, just as evolution had followed it in biological science. But, following the empirical procedures of the Boas school, his own meticulous

studies of particular societies helped destroy the oversimplified world evolutionary schemes of the nineteenth-century writers. His childhood history of the world was narrowed to the history and culture of tribes of the southeastern United States, a task done with incredible thoroughness and incomparable competence. His devotion to truth also led him to accept conclusions of psychological research which placed his own religious convictions in doubt, but in the end he found experimental evidence that renewed his convictions and put his mind at rest.

KEY TO ABBREVIATIONS

- Am. Anth.=American Anthropologist
 Am. Antiq.=American Antiquity
 Am. Speech=American Speech
 Ann. Rep. Bur. Am. Ethnol.=Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology
 Bur. Am. Ethnol. Bull.=Bulletin of the Bureau of American Ethnology
 Expl. and Field-Work Smithsonian Inst.=Explorations and Field-Work Smithsonian Institution
 Florida Hist. Quart.=Florida Historical Quarterly
 Int. Congr. Amer.=International Congress of Americanists
 Int. J. Am. Ling.=International Journal of American Linguistics
 J. Am. Folk-Lore=Journal of American Folk-Lore
 J. Washington Acad. Sci.=Journal of the Washington Academy of Sciences
 Mem. Am. Anth. Assoc.=Memoirs of the American Anthropological Association
 Mem. Am. Mus. Nat. Hist.=Memoirs of the American Museum of Natural History
 Nat. Acad. Sci. Biogr. Mem.=National Academy of Sciences Biographical Memoirs
 Proc. Mississippi Valley Hist. Assoc.=Proceedings of the Mississippi Valley Historical Association
 Pub. Am. Ethnol. Soc.=Publications of the American Ethnological Society
 Sci. Am. Suppl.=Scientific American Supplement
 Sci. Mo.=Scientific Monthly
 Smithsonian Misc. Coll.=Smithsonian Miscellaneous Collections

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- With Franz Boas. Siouan: Dakota (Teton and Santee Dialects), with Remarks on the Ponca and Winnebago. Bur. Am. Ethnol. Bull. 40, Part 1, pp. 875-965.
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