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Lynd, Helen Merrell

(17 March 1896–30 January 1982)

Robert C. Bannister

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Lynd, Helen Merrell (17 March 1896–30 January 1982), sociologist and social philosopher, was born in LaGrange, Illinois, the daughter of Edward Tracey Merrell and Mabel Waite. After serving briefly as the editor of a small Congregationalist journal, her father moved from one nondescript job to another, while her mother supplemented his meager income by taking in boarders. Raised a strict Congregationalist, Lynd rebelled against her parents' narrow provincialism, especially concerning sexual behavior. Throughout her later work, a former colleague later commented, Lynd ran a protest against "cautious ... Protestant forebears, who interpreted Christianity as a restraint on her vitality." But Lynd herself also remembered her parent's opposition to social injustice in their small midwestern town. Their vision of humanity, without regard to race, class, or nation, laid a basis for a holistic vision of human behavior that profoundly shaped her later thought. After the family moved to Framingham, Massachusetts, Lynd attended nearby Wellesley College (B.A. 1919), where she was especially influenced by Mary S. Case, who introduced her to philosophy, particularly Hegel. "Miss Case with my father," she later reminisced in an interview, "were the great influences in my life."

After teaching school for two years, Lynd began graduate work at Columbia, where she eventually earned an M.A. (1922) and Ph.D. (1944) in history. In 1921 she married Robert S. Lynd, a divinity student at Union Theological Seminary and later a distinguished sociologist, with whom she collaborated on the two studies of Muncie, Indiana, for which they were best known: *Middletown: A Study in Contemporary American Culture* (1929) and *Middletown in Transition: A Study of Cultural Conflicts* (1937). Climaxing work in the social survey tradition, *Middletown* broke new ground by applying methods derived from recent British and American anthropology to a contemporary American community. Although the sponsoring committee, the Rockefeller Foundation's Institute of Social and Religious Research, repudiated the project, judging the initial manuscript to be too diffuse and possibly irreligious, it was soon hailed as a classic of sociological research. For her part in the project, Helen Lynd joined her husband and three other researchers in Muncie from January 1924 through June 1925 and later contributed to the analysis and writing to a point where it was difficult to distinguish her contribution from his (even though, in awarding Robert a Ph.D. in 1931 for the work, Columbia required him to pencil out the portions she had written). Although Helen Lynd did not return to Muncie for the follow-up study in the summer of 1935, she helped analyze the findings and contributed substantially to the writing of *Middletown in Transition*.

With a versatility increasingly rare in academia, Lynd during the 1940s and 1950s turned from sociology to history, psychology, and social philosophy. In *England in the Eighteen Eighties* (1945), a study inspired by work under Columbia historian Carlton J. H. Hayes, she described the shift in English opinion during that decade from a negative to a positive conception of freedom to be realized through vigorous state action. Applying to an entire country and an earlier period the methods of social analysis developed in the Middletown studies, Lynd challenged conventional portraits of the decade as one of political reaction. In *Field Work in College Education* (1945) she argued that “field work,” as exemplified by students at Sarah Lawrence who developed off-campus projects in the arts and the social and natural sciences, was an essential component of a liberal education, opposing it to the “great books” curriculum at St. John’s College (Annapolis) and to narrowly conceived “practical” and “technical” work.

In *On Shame and the Search for Identity* (1958) and numerous reviews during the 1950s, Lynd continued to criticize the growing cult of “conformity” and “adjustment” as represented in psychology by Harry Stack Sullivan and other contemporary psychologists, who, she alleged, treated human personalities as separate entities while ignoring the dynamic relations among them. Her starting point was a distinction between guilt and shame: the first the result of violating a specific code, the second of a wound to one’s self-esteem. Experiences of shame, however painful, she argued, provided insight into unrecognized aspects of society and the world. Shame thus could provide clues not to what a person is, but what he or she might become. In exploring the problems of identity in modern society, one reviewer noted, the book joined the distinguished company of Erich Fromm’s *Escape from Freedom*, Erik Erikson’s *Childhood and Society*, and David Riesman’s *The Lonely Crowd*.

From 1928 to 1965 Lynd taught social philosophy at Sarah Lawrence. The prefix “social,” she later explained, allowed her to “follow any possible road to discovery.” It also signaled her own commitment to social activism. During the McCarthy era, she came under attack from the local American Legion, who demanded that Sarah Lawrence fire her for alleged communist sympathies. By her own later account, the only evidence was various petitions she had signed and the fact that for several years she had served as possibly the only nonparty member of New York Teachers Union. In March 1953 she was also summoned, along with twelve other members of the Sarah Lawrence Faculty, before Senator William Jenner’s Internal Security Subcommittee, where, to her later regret, she testified that she had not been a Communist party member rather than decline to answer on Constitutional grounds. Writing in the *American Scholar* four years earlier, she already had condemned the dismissal of several faculty members at the University of Washington for alleged communist sympathies. In one of the reviews collected in *Toward Discovery* (1965), she wrote that freedom “in a democracy is not a dispensable luxury to be enjoyed at such times as the society is secure and untroubled, but rather, is itself the basis of security and survival.” In other essays and public addresses she elaborated the theories of society and education that

informed her scholarly work, insisting always on the human potential for self-discovery and development and on the importance of seeing issues in ever larger contexts. Learned as well as humane, Lynd illustrated her points with copious references and quotations from European philosophy and literature.

Although Lynd rarely if ever addressed issues of feminism or the situation of women in her published work, she was an important representative of the generation of American women professionals whose careers spanned the decades from the 1920s through the 1950s. The tensions inherent in this role were, for Lynd, a source of creativity and insight. Her work, remarked political scientist Susanne Hoeber Rudolph, was distinguished by a “sensory concreteness,” an attention to “the feeling tone of any situation as much or more as its factual or logical side,” the former being “a kind of knowing which some would say is purely feminine.” Reviewing her own life, Lynd likewise saw herself torn between a quest for “largeness and relatedness” and “concentration on detail.” Praising her combination of sympathy and analysis, historian Bert James Loewenberg observed that she “transformed openness to experience into a rigorous analytical discipline.” Although Lynd’s professional reputation remained inextricably bound up with that of her husband on the Middletown studies, the tension between personal understanding and meticulous scholarship in *On Shame and the Search for Identity* and her other published work earned her a distinct if minor place among the social theorists of her generation.

Dedicated to her family no less than to her career, Lynd remained married to Robert until his death in 1970. They had two children, one of whom (Staughton) gained prominence as an historian and social activist during the 1960s. She died in Warren, Ohio.

Bibliography

The Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress holds a collection of the papers of Robert S. and Helen Lynd. The Oral History Archive at Columbia contains interviews with Helen Lynd, a version of which is printed in Helen M. Lynd, *Possibilities* (1983). Selections from Lynd’s published and previously unpublished work are collected in *Toward Discovery*, ed. Bert James Loewenberg (1965). Although no formal study of Lynd’s career exists, her work in connection with the Middletown studies is discussed in passing in Maurice R. Stein, *The Eclipse of Community* (1960), and Dwight W. Hoover, *Middletown Revisited* (1990). Obituaries are in the *Chicago Tribune*, 2 Feb. 1982, and the 15 Feb. 1982 issues of *Newsweek*, *Time*, and *AB Bookman’s Weekly*.

See also

Lynd, Robert Staughton (1892-1970), sociologist and social commentator

Hayes, Carlton J. H. (1882-1964), historian

Sullivan, Harry Stack (1892-1949), psychiatrist and social scientist

Fromm, Erich Pinchas (1900-1980), psychoanalyst, social psychologist, and author

Erikson, Erik (1902-1994), psychoanalyst, author, and intellectual

Riesman, David (1909-2002), sociologist

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