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Obituary Notes: Margaret Mead as Historian of Anthropology

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OBITUARY NOTE: MARGARET MEAD AS HISTORIAN OF ANTHROPOLOGY

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With the death of Margaret Mead, anthropology has lost one of its major historical figures. Since her wide-ranging work included also contributions to the historiography of the discipline, it seems appropriate to mark her passing in HAN.

Margaret Mead wrote the history of the discipline in terms of its major (American) practitioners--herself, Franz Boas, and Ruth Benedict. Justification for the approach lay in her belief that not only did individuals formulate the dominant ideas of the discipline, but personal commitments shaped its history. Mead's historiography is most evident in her biographical study of Ruth Benedict (An Anthropologist at Work [1959]), which sets forth the premises of an approach that also informs her own autobiography (Blackberry Winter [1972]), and her retrospective accounts of fieldwork (Letters from the Field [1977]).

"What she herself kept as a record is essentially her view of what was important in her life, here ordered by my understanding growing out of a friendship of twenty-five years" (1959:xix). In the introduction to An Anthropologist at Work Mead thus suggests an "emic" history, written from the point of view of the subject. But at the same time she reminds us that the historian is not a passive reporter, but orders available data through insight and memory.

Memory represents two things in Mead's history, an immersed recall of the past and an ordering device by which the writer rationalizes and distinguishes the past from the present. Memory recaptures the past and, if imperfectly, represents the past point of view. But memory also depends upon present concerns and provides a distance that the historian requires. A favorite simile reveals the relationship that Mead perceived between document and memory: ". . . my own memory has woven back and forth like an embroidery needle threading together parts of a tapestry" (1959:xxi). To create a whole tapestry, the historian must be distant from the subject in time and in perspective, a point of which Mead is occasionally too well-aware. Only from the present can a pattern be seen, according to Mead; from the present, however, Mead has sometimes seen the past as too ordered and neat.

A final point regarding Mead's historiography involves her notion of style, and with it of audience. History, like the tales told by her grandmother (1972:50) and by her informant Mrs. Parkinson (ibid.:179), speaks to any who listen. The historian, like the tale-teller, describes the past in plain language. The language of the era about which she writes is translated, sometimes bodily lifted into, the language of her contemporaries. Like the tale-teller, too, the historian binds present to the past, effectively "threading" the two together.

The structure of An Anthropologist at Work carries out the history

Mead espoused. Benedict's statements about herself are interspersed with Mead's interpretations, and several distinct chronologies emerge. Mead takes her cues for chronology from the subject's emphases, so that the topic determines sequence. What is happening and what has happened possess an inner arrangement, which the historian must detect and then present "in such a way that no matter how many centuries have transpired, the phrasing would make sense to [the subjects]" (1959:xxi).

Less apparently, the same approach determines Mead's retrospective accounts of fieldwork and of her own life. Mead suggests an equivalence between the history of fieldwork and the history of anthropology. Expanding her notion of the maker of history she suggests that the anthropological fieldworker becomes for the Samoans, the Manus, the Balinese, the one who reveals history. She talks of the Manus, "whose past I know better than they do" (1977:280). But, reaffirming a point made in An Anthropologist at Work, she notes that her own past is intertwined with Manus past, "I live neck-deep in the past" (ibid.:268). The 1960's interpretation of Manus life stems from and redesigns a 1920's interpretation. Mead reminds us that changes in fieldwork determine changes in anthropology, and that method and discipline respond delicately to changes in world-wide circumstances.

To the literate Balinese Mead brought another form of history. "We had forgotten all this," said Kutan looking at the pictures that I brought back, 'but you had them all the time'" (Golde 1970:320). The visual element in Mead's history points up an aspect complementary to the idea of "threading." Her history is so continuous as to be almost circular; that is, as generation replaces and resembles generation, the course of history twines in upon itself. "Setting side by side pictures of my daughter and my granddaughter, of my grandmother as a young woman and as I last knew her, of my father with my young sister and, many years later, with my mother, of myself, as a child, with my brother, of my brother and sisters growing up, I found that all these pictures echoed each other," she wrote in the prologue to Blackberry Winter (1972:5). Throughout the autobiography, the sense of generation succeeding generation implies not replacement but repetition and continuity. The pattern while altered will never be fatally interrupted. Although it refers to family history, Mead's statement describes her general history as well: succession in a family resembles the succession of generations in Pere Village, of generations in anthropology, and--for Mead--of generations of human beings, whose "shared experiences bind them together in a web that is stronger than the ancestral ghosts. . . ." (1977:314). The task of the historian matches the task of the fieldworker and anthropologist, and those two match the task of biographer and autobiographer. The task is to remind us, the audience, of continuity and of the fact that just as the past determined the present, the present must determine the future. We neither lose our past nor understand it apart from our present; knowing this we are guided to the future.

An Anthropologist at Work and Blackberry Winter each end with chapters titled "Gathered Threads." The historian has drawn together the threads left dangling by the subject and recreated the pattern of a

life. The last letter in Letters from the Field, written in 1975, brings Mead's past up to her, and our, present. From Manus Mead writes with confidence that a new generation of anthropologists will create history for the world's people. This same new generation, she knew, would also at once make and write the history of anthropology. Because she knew the present generation would take up and rearrange the elements of the past, Margaret Mead was not afraid of growing old. "This year we have been going to bed early and often I have lain awake for hours, but somehow no longer rebelling, just thinking . . . The major things I wanted to see have happened. If I had to leave today instead of next week, no harm would be done" (1977:317).

Golde, Peggy. Women in the Field. Chicago: Aldine, 1970.

Mead, Margaret. An Anthropologist at Work. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1959.

_____. Blackberry Winter. New York: Morrow, 1972.

_____. Letters from the Field. New York: Harper & Row, 1977.

SOURCES FOR THE HISTORY OF ANTHROPOLOGY

I. NEWS FROM THE NATIONAL ANTHROPOLOGICAL ARCHIVES

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The National Anthropological Archives has two major projects under way. Plans to publish the papers of John P. Harrington on microfilm were reported in an earlier issue of HAN. The second project is the compilation of a guide to the entire holdings of the archives with general descriptions of the material to the series level. The guide, which will take about two years to complete, will provide researchers an overview of our collections and help them plan visits to the archives. It should also help the archives provide more effective reference service by correspondence.

One of the offshoots in preparing the guide has been the re-examination and compilation of a list of the documents in the United States National Museum Division of Ethnology Manuscript and Pamphlet File. This forty-cubic foot miscellany consists of correspondence, notes, inventories of collections, manuscript articles, vocabularies, cartographic material, bibliographies, photographs, sketches, and printed and processed material. Although the dates span from the 8th century A.D. (a page from the Koran) to the 1970's, most of the documents are dated between 1880 and 1950. Owing to poor control, the file has been little used in spite of the fact that it is one of the archives' chief sources concerning the work of Curators Otis T. Mason, Walter Hough, Thomas