

INTRODUCTION



At the time of her death in 1978, Margaret Mead was one of the three best-known women in the United States and America's first woman of science. A prolific author, sought-after public speaker, icon, and oracle, Mead was the public face of anthropology and its ambassador to the world for much of the twentieth century. She spoke to the great issues of her time and was widely recognized for her many contributions. After her death, she was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President Jimmy Carter. The award noted that

Margaret Mead was both a student of civilization and an exemplar of it. To a public of millions, she brought the central insight of cultural anthropology: that varying cultural patterns express an underlying human unity. She mastered her discipline, but she also transcended it. Intrepid, independent, plain spoken, fearless, she remains a model for the young and a teacher from whom all may learn.

On the other side of the world, Mead's passing was remembered in a very different context. On the island of Manus off the coast of New Guinea, the people of Pere village also mourned her death. Mead first studied the people of Pere in the late 1920s, returning in the 1950s with further visits thereafter. Over a span of five decades, she touched their lives, and they touched hers. Such was Mead's stature that they commemorated her death with a ceremony befitting a great leader.

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Margaret Mead
Paul Shankman

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Who was Margaret Mead? And how did she become such an exceptional anthropologist and public figure? Mead began her career in anthropology with graduate work at Columbia University and fieldwork in Samoa in the 1920s. Public recognition came with her very first book, *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928b). But Samoa was just the beginning of a long and very productive career. On her return from the islands, Mead became an assistant curator at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City, home for her entire professional life. She spent much of the next decade doing more fieldwork in the South Pacific as a committed and indefatigable ethnographer. Between 1928 and 1939, Mead conducted fieldwork in five different New Guinea cultures, including Manus, Arapesh, Tchambuli, Mundugumor, and Iatmul, as well as additional fieldwork in Bali and on the Omaha reservation. No anthropologist has conducted as much fieldwork in as many different cultures in such a brief period of time and published as much professional and popular work on them as Mead did. She was a whirlwind of energy and professional activity.

Mead pioneered work on topics such as childhood, adolescence, gender, and national character, and was a founding figure in culture-and-personality studies. She advanced fieldwork methods through the use of photography, film, and psychological testing, as well as the use of teams of researchers—women and men. Her popular books from this period include the bestsellers *Growing Up in New Guinea* (1930b) and *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (1935). She also authored professional monographs and articles on most of the cultures that she studied.

Mead was one of the three great popularizers of the concept of culture in the early decades of the twentieth century. Along with her mentors, Franz Boas and Ruth Benedict, she led a revolution in how people thought about differences between groups of people. This tiny band of anthropologists from a virtually unknown discipline had a major impact on academic and public thinking about “race.” At the turn of the twentieth century, “race” and inborn biological traits were thought to explain differences between groups, and ideas about racial superiority and inferiority

were part of this world view. The replacement of racial thinking with a cultural perspective on group differences was anthropology's most significant contribution in the first half of the twentieth century, and Mead was one of its foremost proponents.

Using Samoa as a case study, Mead found that culture, rather than biology, was responsible for differences between American and Samoan adolescents. According to Mead, Samoan adolescence was less stressful than American adolescence, and this was the result of socialization within a specific cultural context. American and Samoan adolescents shared a common biology, but biology was not destiny. So the same biological process—puberty—did not lead to similar behavioral outcomes. Moreover, these differences did not indicate the superiority of one group's socialization practices over another's.

Like other cultural anthropologists, Mead advocated temporarily suspending Western values and judgments in order to understand other cultures on their own terms. So, in the study of cultures, ethnocentrism gave way to cultural relativism. Today this perspective is taken for granted, but in the early twentieth century cultural relativism was an important step forward for ethnographers of that era and for the public. In addition, Mead used her own values and judgments in comparing cultures and in drawing lessons for American society from her study of other cultures; thus, the subtitle of *Coming of Age in Samoa* was *A Psychological Study of Primitive Youth for Western Civilisation*.

Following her ethnographic work in the 1920s and 1930s, Mead's career took a different direction with the onset of World War II. During the war, she worked for the U.S. government. Unlike her earlier, village-based fieldwork in non-Western cultures, Mead was now studying the national character of highly stratified, mostly Western nations. Since fieldwork was not possible during the war, interdisciplinary teams of researchers studied these cultures "at a distance." Mead was also involved in applied projects during the war and would become a founding member of the Society for Applied Anthropology. In the postwar era, Mead continued to network broadly across disciplinary boundaries, leading organizations, arranging conferences on pressing

issues, and making anthropology relevant to audiences beyond her own field.

In 1960, Mead was elected president of the American Anthropological Association, and in 1975 she became president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. As a public figure and influential thinker, she wrote for popular magazines, such as *Redbook*, and appeared on radio and television programs, as well as authored more bestselling books such as *Male and Female* (1949), *Culture and Commitment* (1971), and her autobiography *Blackberry Winter* (1972). People wanted to know what Margaret Mead would say, and she was quite willing to share her opinions. As a result, her colleagues in anthropology had mixed views about Mead. On the one hand, they appreciated her work in the public sphere, putting anthropology on the map. Yet that same work also led anthropologists to label her a “popularizer” and to pay less attention to the professional side of her work.

In the public eye, Mead was a complex figure. Her accomplishments led many Americans to admire her. *Time* magazine called her “Mother to the World” (21 March 1969). A number of young women saw Mead as a role model and early feminist. However, in the 1960s Mead did not consider herself a feminist and had harsh words for “radical” feminists. On the other hand, conservative critics sometimes viewed Mead as a dangerous liberal responsible for the sexual revolution and the subsequent “moral decay” of American youth. Yet a review of Mead’s writing during the 1960s demonstrates that she was not in the forefront of either the sexual revolution or the women’s movement.

Mead’s life and work embodied many apparent contradictions, making her almost impossible to characterize or categorize. As Nancy Lutkehaus has written, Mead was *both*:

American intellectual and best-selling author/media celebrity, innovative ethnographer and popularizer of anthropology, dedicated social scientist and outspoken social critic, bourgeois liberal and staunch Episcopalian . . . professional career woman and champion of motherhood, a successful

woman in a man's world, feminine and masculine, heterosexual and homosexual. (Lutkehaus 2008: 8)

Similarly, there is no easy way to summarize Mead's contributions. A listing of her publications alone is the subject of a small book (Gordan 1976). Indeed, Mead authored, coauthored, and edited over three dozen books. Although not the most important theorist of her era, her pioneering research and writing laid a foundation for work by future anthropologists and others; her tireless efforts on anthropology's behalf helped Americans understand what anthropology was, and her ability to connect with the public remains unparalleled.

This book traces Mead's career as an ethnographer, as an early voice of anthropology, and as a public figure, linking the professional and personal sides of her career. Her personal network of mentors, friends, partners, and spouses played a major role in her career opportunities, field site choices, and theoretical perspectives. This network provides an important context for understanding Mead's career through the end of World War II, a period that comprises much of this book. Samoa receives special emphasis because it provided a template for her future fieldwork. Mead's personal opinions about her ethnographic work during the 1920s and 1930s have been included because she was unusually candid in providing a "behind-the-scenes" view of her life as a fieldworker.

The latter part of the book focuses on Mead's work on national character studies during and immediately after World War II, her interdisciplinary work outside of anthropology, and her role as a public figure up to her death. These areas of Mead's life are less well known but were significant nonetheless. In these latter sections of the book, criticism of Mead's professional and popular work will be discussed, including the controversy over *Coming of Age in Samoa*. The final part of the book examines Mead's multiple legacies.

Readers may already be familiar with Mead and wish to learn more. There is a great deal to learn. In doing research for this book, I read or reread most of Mead's major works, a number

of her letters, as well as biographical works about her life. And I am still learning. Mead was unique as a scholar, activist, and person, accomplishing so much and doing so as a woman in a man's world. Her success in this predominantly male context, both within anthropology and beyond, cannot be overstated. Yet some of her work was ultimately unsuccessful, including the national character studies to which she devoted over a decade of her life. And there were personal relationships that did not turn out well. Addressing all of the dimensions of Mead's life and work is beyond the scope of this book. Nevertheless, I shall try to cover a number of them in this introduction to one of anthropology's most important ancestors.