



Margaret Mead (1901-1978)

Biography

Margaret Mead, a world-famous cultural anthropologist, was born in 1901 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and raised in the nearby small town of Doyleston. Her father, Edward Sherwood Mead, was a professor of finance at the *Wharton School* at the *University of Pennsylvania*. Her mother, Emily (née Fogg) Mead, was a sociologist studying Italian immigrants and a progressive feminist activist. Margaret's grandmother, Martha Ramsay Mead, was a child psychologist who first taught Margaret to observe the behaviour of young children to figure out the reasons behind their actions. As a child, Margaret was fascinated by tradition and ritual, and, in a family in which many different Christian outlooks were represented, she eventually decided that the rituals of the Episcopal Church most closely fit her attitudes. She studied for one year at De Pauw University (1919) before transferring to Barnard College. She received her bachelor's degree from Barnard in 1923 and went on to study with distinguished anthropologists Franz Boas and Ruth Benedict at Columbia University. She received her Master's Degree from Columbia in 1924 and set out in 1925 to do field work in Samoa. In 1926 she became an assistant curator at the American Museum of Natural History. She received her Ph.D. from Columbia in 1929 for her thesis on the relative stability of several elements in five Polynesian cultures. Over her long career she published 12 books as the sole author, including the best seller, *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928), *Growing Up in New Guinea* (1930), *Male and Female* (1949), *Growth and Culture* (1951), her autobiography *Blackberry Winter* (1972), and another 9 books as co-author or editor. She made 24 field trips among the people of the south pacific. She died of on Nov. 15, 1978 in New York City. In 1976, she was inducted into the National Woman's Hall of Fame. She was posthumously awarded the *Presidential Medal of Freedom* in 1979 by President Jimmy Carter. She appeared on a commemorative postage stamp in the United States in 1998. Her groundbreaking work on sexuality, culture and childrearing has been both enormously influential. Her pediatrician, the famous child psychologist, Benjamin Spock, incorporated some of her ethnological observations, particularly the idea of breastfeeding upon demand by the baby rather than on a rigid schedule, into his recommendations. Though controversial, Mead is recognized as one of the very greatest anthropologists of all time.

Personal Life

Mead had a brief affair with the well-known linguist, Edward Sapir, a close friend of her professor, the distinguished Columbia anthropologist Ruth Benedict. However, she found Sapir's conservative ideas about a woman's role in relationships unacceptable. The two separated before she first left for Samoa. Mead married three times. After a six-year engagement she married American theology student Luther Cressman, who later became an anthropologist. In her *Blackberry Winter* she characterized the marriage, which lasted from 1923-1928, as "my student marriage," a characterization that Cressman rejects. She later married New Zealander, Reo Fortune, who went on to study psychology at *Cambridge*. The marriage lasted from 1923 to 1928. Her third marriage was to the distinguished anthropologist Gregory Bateson, with whom she had a daughter, Mary Catherine Bateson, who also became an anthropologist. She was devastated when Bateson left her but she remained his loving friend thereafter, keeping her photograph beside her bed, including her hospital death-bed. Mead also had a relationship with her Columbia professor Ruth Benedict. Her daughter, Mary Catherine Bateson, in her book, *With a Daughter's Eye*, states that the relationship between Benedict and Mead was "partly" sexual.¹ Mead also spent her last years in a close personal and professional relationship with prominent anthropologist Rhoda Metraux, with whom she lived from 1955 until her death in 1978. The letters between the two published in 2006 express a romantic relationship. Mead herself never identified as a lesbian or as bisexual but in her writings, she states that it is normal for a person's sexual orientation to evolve over the course of their life.

Coming of Age in Samoa

In her first study in Samoa, lasting about nine months, Mead observed, interviewed, and interacted with 68 girls between the ages of 9 and 20 from three separate villages on the Island of *Ta'u* in *American Samoa*. Mead argues that unlike stressed American girls of the same age, the culturally stable Samoan society free of violence, conflicting values and shameful taboos, allowed the Samoan girls to enjoy a well-balanced carefree sexually active life, including innocent same-sex relationships that were often left behind at maturity. The Samoan girls, she claims, described this period of youthful freedom as the "best period of their lives" before, as adults, going on to happy and productive lives as wives and mothers. In the preface to the 1973 edition of the book, Mead does admit that there is a price to be paid for the freer unstressed life of Samoan culture, namely, "less intensity, less individuality, less involvement with life."

Growing Up in New Guinea

In *Growing Up in New Guinea*, Mead lived in the New Guinea Manus fishing village of Peri for about six months, conducting extensive field work, at a crucial time – after tribal warfare had vanished but before communication with the outside world began to change their way of life. She studied the children through observation, but also by collecting their spontaneous drawings, asking them to interpret ink blots, and recording their interpretations of various events and answers to

problem questions. She describes how the Manus teach their children basic safety, but spoil them excessively (especially the fathers) and leave them for the most part to their own devices. As a result, the children regard their parents with contempt and expect them to sacrifice for the children. Manus society, therefore, produces self-reliant individuals, but, on the negative side, they are acquisitive and materialistic and have little respect for their ancestors. In this respect, Manus society displays some similarities with American society, but the Manus have greater respect for property than their American counterparts.

Male and Female

Summing up the results of her observations of her many field studies in the south pacific, including Samoa, New Guinea, Bali and the Admiralty Islands, Mead describes the very different gender roles played by men and women in these cultures. In some, sexual intercourse is considered delightful and in others a necessary evil. In some men envy and try to emulate the roles of women. In others the woman's place is definitely not seen to be in the home. In some childbearing is seen as hateful and others children are prized possessions. Mead concludes that the masculine and feminine traits rigidly distinguished in the United States are not based on innate sex differences but reflect *cultural conditioning*.

Criticisms

In 1983, New Zealand anthropologist Derek Freeman, on the basis of his own field study in Samoa, in which he interviewed some of the same girls from Mead's study, now grown up, argued that Mead had *romanticized* Samoan culture and misreported both their sexual practices and the prevalence of violence. Because of her own prejudices, Mead saw what she wanted to see, an innocent stress-free culture in the south pacific uncorrupted by Western taboos. The samples are too small (68 girls from 3 villages is not sufficient) and 9 months is too short. Further, the Samoan girls quickly understood what Mead *wanted* to her and concocted tales of carefree stress-free Samoan sexuality. The fact that she systematically changed the names of the Samoan girls to protect their identities has even been taken to suggest that she fabricated her results. Freeman's critique has gone in and out of favor over the years. In 1983, the *American Anthropological Association* strongly rejected Freeman's work. However, *Harvard* psychologist Steven Pinker, biologist Richard Dawkins and Ernst Mayr, evolutionary psychologist David Buss, writer Matt Ridley, *MIT* historian Bruce Mazlish, Wellsley classicist professor Mary Lefkowitz, and philosopher Peter Singer are critical of Mead's views. Indeed, Pinker claims that the truth about violence and innocent sex in Samoa is precisely the opposite to the way Mead represents it. Further, some conservatives see Mead as bringing about moral decline in America by undermining longstanding traditions. In general, nurture-oriented scholars are more inclined to agree with Mead's conclusions while nature-oriented scholars tend to disagree with them. The continuing controversy illustrates the important fact that observing human beings accurately is much more

difficult than observing inanimate objects because human beings, when they know they are being observed, change their behavior.

Richard McDonough

¹ Lapsley, *Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict*, p. 165

Works

Sole Author:

Coming of Age in Samoa (1928)

Growing Up in New Guinea (1930)

The Changing Culture of an Indian Tribe (1932)

Sex and Temperment in Three Primitive Societies (1935)

Keep Your Powder Dry: An Anthropologist Looks at America (1942)

Male and Female (1949)

New Lives for Old: Cultural Traditions in Manus

People and Places (1959 – for younger readers)

Continuities in Cultural Evolution (1964)

Culture and Commitment (1970)

The Mountain Arapesh: Stream of events in Aliota (1971)

Blackberry Winter: My Earlier Years (1972)

Editor or co-author:

Balinese Character: A Photographic Analysis (1942)

Cultural Patterns and Technical Change, editor (1953)

Primitive Heritage: An Anthropologist at Work, editor (1959, reprinted 1966)

A Study of Culture at a Distance, edited with Rhoda Metraux (1953)

Themes in French Culture, with Rhoda Metraux (1954)

The Wagon and the Star: A Study of American Community Initiative, co-authored with Muriel Whitbeck (1966)

A Rap on Race, with James Baldwin (1971)

A Way of Seeing, with Rhoda Metraux (1975)

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Mead's works online

Coming of Age in Samoa: <https://archive.org/details/comingofageinsam00mead/mode/2up>

Growing up in New Guinea:

<https://archive.org/details/growingupinnewgu00mead/page/86/mode/2up>