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Mead, Margaret (1901-1978)

by Linda Rapp

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One of the most prominent American anthropologists of her generation, Margaret Mead was respected within the profession and well known to the general public through her popularizing writings.

Early Life and Education

In her work Mead observed and analyzed the structures of various societies, giving particular attention to the family, child-rearing practices, and the roles of men and women. Ironically, her own family life was rather unorthodox, and this very public commentator about the lives and practices of others kept her own bisexuality a closely guarded secret.

Mead came from a family in which education was valued. Her parents, Edward Mead and Emily Fogg Mead, were both college graduates. Edward Mead became a professor of economics at the Wharton School of Commerce of the University of Pennsylvania.

Margaret Mead, the oldest of the couple's five children, was born in Philadelphia on December 16, 1901. With the strong encouragement of her family, especially her mother and her grandmother Martha Mead, she became an excellent student. She hoped to attend Wellesley College as her mother had, but due to financial considerations she enrolled instead at DePauw University, her father's alma mater, in 1919.

After a year she was able to transfer to Barnard College in New York City. There she took a course with the eminent anthropologist Franz Boas and also encountered Ruth Benedict, then Boas's teaching assistant, who would achieve prominence in the field herself. Benedict was a mentor to Mead. The two women also became devoted lifelong friends.

When Mead proposed to go to the South Pacific to do fieldwork, Boas tried to dissuade her, citing the arduousness and potential danger of such a project, especially for a woman. Supported by Benedict, Mead prevailed and set off for Samoa in 1925.

Coming of Age in Samoa

Her research, published as *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928), was groundbreaking in that it focused on women, specifically young women making the transition to adulthood. The best-selling book helped to establish Mead's reputation and quickly became a standard work in the emerging field of anthropology.

After Mead's death Derek Freeman attacked the book--and Mead--in *Margaret Mead and Samoa: The Making and Unmaking of an Anthropological Myth* (1983). Freeman made a splash in the popular press and on the talk-show circuit with his intemperate charges that Mead was duped by informants who gave her incorrect information when she interviewed them, and that her depiction of and conclusions about Samoan society were inaccurate.

While the debate continues, most anthropologists continue to view *Coming of Age in Samoa* as a classic, while acknowledging that it has some flaws, primarily caused by Mead's youth and inexperience. Several have also made the point that it is important to consider the book as a product of its time and to view it in the context of the history of anthropology, especially as a product of the Boas school of anthropology.

Marriages and Career

Mead had married Luther Cressman, an Episcopal minister who later became an archeologist, in 1923. In defiance of convention Mead retained her own surname. The marriage seems to have been based more on shared humanitarian ideals than on love or sexual attraction.

During a sea voyage to Europe after her year in Samoa, Mead met and fell in love with Reo Fortune, a psychologist from New Zealand, whom she married in 1928 after divorcing Cressman. The second marriage was at times tumultuous and foundered when Mead met anthropologist Gregory Bateson, whom she married in 1935 after her second divorce. Although the marriage to Bateson was the happiest of the three, it also ended in divorce, in 1950.

Mead's career was an active one. She made numerous fieldwork trips to New Guinea and also studied the society of Bali. She stressed the need for objectivity when observing other cultures in order to avoid imposing the views and values of one's own society upon the people being studied. She challenged readers to consider different cultural patterns and to realize that other models may be as valid as the more familiar ones.

Stephen O. Murray credits Mead as "a pioneer in team ethnography and in the use of photography." One of her books, *Balinese Character: A Photographic Analysis* (1942), co-authored with Bateson, reflects both of these interests.

Mead joined the staff of the American Museum of Natural History in New York as an assistant curator in 1926 and remained with the museum for the rest of her life, rising to associate curator and curator of ethnology and being named curator emeritus upon her retirement. Over the years she also held visiting lectureships at many universities throughout the United States and in England and Australia.

Mead authored or co-authored some forty books, including both scholarly and popular works, biography and autobiography, and books for children. As a contributing editor to the magazine *Redbook*, she wrote essays on a wide range of topics from parenting issues and environmental concerns to Christmastime reminiscences and even the question of UFOs.

Although she had some differences with the leaders of the feminist movement, she spoke out strongly for the rights of women.

Mead remained active until the very end of her life. In the summer of 1978 she organized a conference at which she, her ex-husband Bateson, and their daughter, Mary Catherine Bateson, also an anthropologist, all gave presentations. Mead succumbed to cancer a few months later, on November 15. She was posthumously awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Mead's Bisexuality and "the Isolation of Secrecy"

Such was the public persona of Margaret Mead. What only the people closest to her knew was that this very visible and highly respected woman who wrote extensively about aspects of behavior, including sexuality, was herself bisexual.

Among the most important relationships of her life was that with Ruth Benedict. In two books on Benedict, *An Anthropologist at Work: The Writings of Ruth Benedict* (1959) and *Ruth Benedict* (1974), and in her own

autobiography, *Blackberry Winter* (1972), Mead represents her as an inspiring mentor and a dear and valued friend but says nothing of their romance. Furthermore, Mead, who edited Benedict's writings after the death of the latter in 1948, included examples of Benedict's poetry--without revealing that some of the love poems had been written for and about her.

Mead's only child, Mary Catherine Bateson, did write about the women's love in her 1984 memoir *With a Daughter's Eye*.

The relationship began during Mead's graduate school years and continued through her three marriages. Bateson calls Benedict and Gregory Bateson "the two people [Mead] loved most fully and abidingly, exploring all the possibilities of personal and intellectual closeness." She recalls that her mother always kept two special photographs on display, one of Benedict on her mantel and one of Gregory Bateson on her bureau.

Bateson further notes that "through the major part of her adult life, [Mead] sustained an intimate relationship with a man and another with a woman. This double pattern must have been very satisfying and sustaining, but at the same time it created a kind of isolation, an isolation of secrecy."

Although Mead was known as an outspoken person, it is not surprising that she chose to remain silent on the subject of her bisexuality. As a young woman planning a career in academia in the 1920s, she was entering what was still largely a man's world in which obstacles to progress for women were already numerous.

Even after achieving prominence, however, Mead still worried about the effect of scandal on her career. Bateson recalls telling her mother about a girl who had had a crush on her during a high school year abroad. Mead responded by giving Bateson a copy of Rosamund Lehmann's novel of bisexual love *Dusty Answer* (1927), but also warned her against becoming involved in a scandal since it could harm Mead professionally.

For the January 1975 issue of *Redbook* Mead wrote an essay entitled "Bisexuality: A New Awareness" (reprinted in *Aspects of the Present*, 1980). Mead spoke with the voice of a dispassionate observer, but her words take on poignancy when one knows that she was in fact writing about herself.

Mead begins her article with the statement, "The time has come, I think, when we must recognize bisexuality as a normal form of human behavior." She goes on to assert that "a very large number of human beings--probably a majority--are bisexual in their potential capacity for love."

Mead supports her argument with references to the cultures of Asia and ancient Greece, the use of gender confusion as a device in Elizabethan plays, the "frankly bisexual" associations of creative people such as members of the Bloomsbury Group and the artistic community of the Left Bank in Paris around the time of World War I, and to the marriage of Vita Sackville-West and Harold Nicolson.

Mead calls for everyone to have "the right to be a person who is unique and who has a social identity that is worthy of dignity and respect" and to be able "to elect single blessedness, to choose companionship with a member of their own or the opposite sex [or] to decide to live a fully communal life."

That Mead, one of America's best known and most admired women, chose to write from the "isolation of secrecy," however, clearly reveals her fear that the hoped for time when bisexuality is recognized as normal had not yet come, at least in her own culture.

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