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RALPH LINTON, 1893-1953

BY GEORGE PETER MURDOCK

AFTER six years of recurrent heart attacks to which he refused to make any serious concessions, Ralph Linton succumbed on 24 December 1953, shortly after a pleasant evening at the theater. Death came to him as he had wished it, "with his boots on," depriving the writer of a close friend and stimulating companion and the world of one of its foremost students of culture.

Born on 27 February 1893, in Philadelphia of Quaker parentage, Linton attended sectarian schools and graduated from Swarthmore College in 1915. Here, reacting from an austere home environment, he was greatly influenced by Dr. Spencer Trotter, a physician and teacher of general science. While still an undergraduate, in 1912 and 1913, he engaged in archeological field work in New Mexico, Colorado, and Guatemala, and in the summer of 1915 he unearthed an archaic site in New Jersey. His graduate work, pursued at the University of Pennsylvania (M.A., 1915), Columbia University, and Harvard University (Ph.D., 1925), was punctuated by periods of field work in New Mexico (summer of 1916), Colorado (1919), the Marquesas Islands (1920-22), and Ohio (1924), and by military service in World War I as an artillery enlisted man; (he was a mild casualty from poison gas in France).

First-hand contact with the living representatives of a simple culture in the Marquesas Islands shifted Linton's primary interest from archeology to ethnology. In 1925, he was sent by the Field Museum of Natural History, with which he was associated as assistant curator from 1922 to 1928, to Madagascar for two and one-half years of intensive field work, from which resulted his major ethnographical monograph, *The Tanala* (1933). Archeological research was resumed in Wisconsin in 1932 and 1933, and in 1934 came his final field work, again in ethnology, among the Comanche of Oklahoma as leader of a summer training party for the Laboratory of Anthropology.

In 1928, Linton began a distinguished career as an academic teacher—first at the University of Wisconsin (1928-37), then at Columbia University (1937-46), and finally at Yale University (1946-53). He was a superb undergraduate lecturer and a highly stimulating instructor of graduate students. Systematic preparation for the classroom sharpened and broadened his intellectual interests, and led to a series of scientific contributions of the first order.

The period at Wisconsin culminated in *The Study of Man* (1936). Though cast in the form of a textbook and widely so used, this work was much more. It fused for the first time the previously divergent historical, functional, and psychological approaches in American anthropology and established that eclectic synthesis which has since become the hallmark of our science in the United States. It also gave new and fruitful definitions to the concepts of status and role, clarified forms of

family structure, and sparkled with illuminating suggestions on nearly every page. Linton regarded it as his most creative work, and the present writer agrees.

During the Columbia period Linton became particularly interested in the interrelations of culture and personality. Collaboration with Dr. Abram Kardiner in the classroom led to two books by the latter—*The Individual and His Society* and *The Psychological Frontiers of Society*—to both of which Linton contributed ethnographical chapters. His own ideas, as they crystallized from this experience, found expression in *The Cultural Background of Personality* (1945).

While at Yale, a long-standing interest in world culture history led Linton to expand his rich lecture notes by extensive additional research with the aim of producing a volume to be entitled *The Tree of Culture*. All but a few chapters were completed at the time of his death, and with some editing by his widow, the former Adelin Sumner Briggs, the book will appear in due course. From the scattered sections seen by this writer, it promises to reveal Linton's creativity at its best—the fruit of wide reading, a nearly photographic memory for details, panoramic scope, and an unparalleled theoretical imagination.

In addition to his independent work, Linton was a prolific editor of symposia, notably *Acculturation in Seven American Indian Tribes* (1940), *The Science of Man in the World Crisis* (1945), and *Most of the World* (1949). He also served as editor of the *American Anthropologist* from 1939 to 1944, and of the *Viking Fund Publications in Anthropology* from 1947 to 1951.¹ The honors accorded to him have been many. He was President of the American Anthropological Association in 1946, Vice-President of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in 1937, and a member of the National Academy of Sciences. In 1951, he received the Viking Fund medal and award in general anthropology, in 1953 he was honored by the American Medical Association as giver of the Thomas William Salmon Lectures for that year, and he had been designated to receive the Huxley Medal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland in 1954. He was, at the time of his death, a Councillor of the American Folklore Society.

With his wide-ranging intellectual curiosity, his phenomenal memory, and his extraordinary fertility of ideas, Linton was a scintillating conversationalist and a delightful companion. He made friends in all walks of life and gave unstintingly of himself in personal relationships. With his students he was warm and quite unforbearing. With colleagues who appreciated him he was equally outgoing, as this writer can testify from years of intimate association; but toward those who were incapable of meeting him half-way he was prone to develop intense and often strongly emotional dislikes. His professional life was consequently studded with a number of stormy episodes.

With the exception of language and kinship, in which he manifested comparatively little interest, Linton ranged over practically the entire subject matter of anthropology as well as venturing widely into the fields of history, art, sociology, and psychology. As regards avocations, he was a connoisseur of precious and semi-precious stones, a collector of native African masks, and a confirmed theater-goer.

¹ For a bibliography of Linton's publications, see *American Anthropologist*, 56 (1954), 279-281.

The diversity and exactness of his knowledge made him a frequent and welcome guest visitor on the television show, "What in the World."

Linton's attainments brought him general recognition during his lifetime as one of the two or three leading anthropologists in the world, and his place in history is certainly secure. More than anyone else, he was responsible for freeing American anthropology from the confusion and seeming sterility into which it had fallen at the end of the Boasian epoch and lifting it to the status of a science which could make common cause with psychology and sociology in a concerted attack upon the nature of man, his society, and his culture.

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