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Nancy C. Lutkehaus: Margaret Mead

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I N T R O D U C T I O N



Mead as American Icon

. . . a man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him and carry an image of him in their minds.
—William James, *The Principles of Psychology*¹

Margaret Mead was the best-known, and most controversial, anthropologist in twentieth-century America. Born in 1901, Mead died in 1978, thus her life spanned the greater part of the period Henry Luce first referred to as “the American century.” It is also the century in which the science of anthropology came to maturity. By the time of her death in 1978, Mead had become a media celebrity and an iconic figure who represented a range of different ideas, values, and beliefs to a broad spectrum of the American public—critics and supporters alike. For many she also came to symbolize the discipline of anthropology, as she was the only anthropologist they had ever heard of.

Her name as well as her image—that of a short (she was only 5 feet 2 inches), stocky, gray-haired woman often dressed in a flowing cape, wearing sensible low-heeled shoes, and carrying a forked walking stick—had become recognizable to a large portion of the American public through her many appearances on television talk shows and her monthly column in *Redbook* magazine. Since her death, fellow anthropologist Derek Freeman’s allegation that Mead’s conclusions about Samoan culture—first published in 1928 in her best-selling book *Coming of Age in Samoa*—were completely wrong precipitated a deluge of work both defending and condemning Mead and catapulted her name into the public arena once again.²

Numerous books have been written about Mead, popular biographies as well as detailed analytic studies of her ethnographic work by social scientists.³ So, why another book about her? And why focus on Mead as an icon?

One answer is because Mead was more than simply someone who “became famous for being famous” (as Daniel Boorstin once described twentieth-century celebrity)⁴—although there is no doubt that later in life many people recognized Mead’s name but had little idea of what she had actually done. In many respects Mead became what Ralph Waldo Emerson once called a “representative” figure, someone who has “a pictorial or representative quality and serves us in the intellect.”⁵ American popular culture is rife with representative figures such as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Abraham Lincoln, or more recently Martin Luther King Jr., John F. Kennedy, and movie stars such Marilyn Monroe and John Wayne. Each of these individuals represents something more in American culture than simply their own personal achievements or the roles they played, either in American history or American movies. Like the culture heroes and mythic figures of other cultures whom anthropologists have traditionally studied, public figures like Mead serve our culture’s need for heroes and heroines—persons we can imbue with larger-than-life expectations and embrace as symbols of cherished or new values—or as enemies of them.⁶

This book is neither a biography nor a hagiography of Mead. It does not present a detailed chronological account of Mead’s life. Instead, it shares common goals with several other recent studies of American cultural icons such as Garry Wills’s study of John Wayne, Paige Baty’s analysis of Marilyn Monroe, Ronald Steel’s investigation of the American public’s “romance” with Robert Kennedy, and Larry McMurtry’s essays about Buffalo Bill, Annie Oakley, and the beginnings of superstardom in America.⁷ Like these studies, as well as others that deal specifically with the notion of icondom such as Wayne Koestenbaum’s personal reverie about Jacqueline Onassis and Tina Brown’s *The Diana Chronicles*; Carl Rollyson and Lisa Paddock’s *Susan Sontag: The Making of an Icon*; and Brenda Silver’s interpretation of the British literary icon, Virginia Woolf,⁸ my aim is to understand what Margaret Mead came to represent to the American public and why she was embraced by so many people, to such a great extent that when she died *Time* magazine described her as “fond grandmother to the global village.”⁹ In short, this book is a study of the

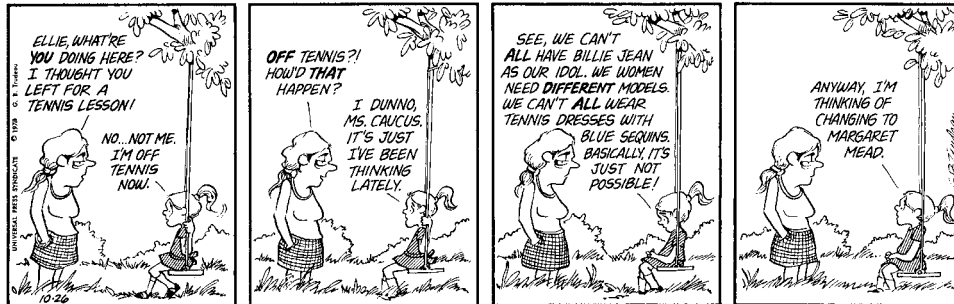


Figure I.1 Garry Trudeau, Doonesbury cartoon, 1973. (Courtesy Universal Press Syndicate)

different images of Margaret Mead that have circulated in American popular culture during the twentieth century and the meanings ascribed to the different “social selves” individuals have attributed to her. By image I mean both visual and verbal representations that people (journalists, writers, advertisers, photographers, painters, scholars) have created of Mead and the responses to these representations by different segments of American society.

In her youth the press characterized Margaret Mead as having studied the “flapper of the South Seas” and promoted her best-selling book *Coming of Age in Samoa* as a description of Samoan youths’ carefree lives of free love under the palms trees. By middle age her name appeared in crossword puzzles and cartoons in popular newspapers and middlebrow magazines, while the mature Mead was the subject of a grassroots movement to draft her as a candidate for president in 1971 as well as a frequent guest on late night television talk shows and a character in *Hair*, Broadway’s first “tribal love rock musical.” Posthumously, her image has appeared on everything from sugar packets to feminist heroine trading cards, at Disney’s Epcot Center (one of five famous scientists), and on a U.S. postage stamp in a series that commemorates the 1920s. Today, the American Museum of Natural History includes her as one of its treasures, the only person in a list that includes fossilized dinosaur eggs, meteorites, and rare uncut emeralds.¹⁰

Even after she died her name made newspaper headlines as a result of philosopher Allan Bloom’s critique of her in *The Closing of the American Mind* as exemplary of the worst of American liberalism and fellow anthropologist Derek Freeman’s attack on the veracity of her Samoan re-

search in *Coming of Age in Samoa*.¹¹ In the mid-1990s, she was even transmogrified by Australian playwright David Williamson into the misguided antagonist in *Heretic*, a play about the Mead-Freeman controversy that received rave reviews when it opened in Sydney.¹²

Mead remains an icon to this day, aided largely by the advent of the Internet. Her name and face can be found on numerous Web sites, especially those that list pithy quotes and humorous Meadisms.¹³ One phrase in particular has captured people's imagination: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."¹⁴ As we will see, because this statement expresses core values that many Americans associate with themselves and with America—such as the importance of community and of grassroots initiative, along with the idea that individuals have the freedom to shape and change their own lives—Mead too has come to symbolize these values to a range of different groups and individuals.

Finally, at the end of the millennium and for the centenary celebration of Mead's birth in 2001, pundits, journalists, and scholars reassessed Mead's contributions to anthropology and to American society. While as a result of the brouhaha Derek Freeman caused over Mead's reputation, *Time* magazine evaluated her as an equivocal icon of twentieth-century American science, other individuals such as historian Susan Ware selected Mead unequivocally as one of seven outstanding popular heroines who helped to shape "the American century."¹⁵ These contradictory assessments of Mead are typical of the diametrically opposite reactions she engendered throughout her life. And it is exactly these differing responses that make Mead such an intriguing and important subject of study in the development of twentieth-century American intellectual and cultural history.

Mead as Public Anthropologist

Although Margaret Mead's name is most commonly associated with the study of what used to be called *primitive* people—in large part because she first became known to the public through her books about Samoa and New Guinea—her role in American society as a public intellectual was based on her ability to apply anthropological data, methods, and insights to the elucidation of problems and issues Americans faced as they

adjusted to the rapid changes of the twentieth century. Because of this latter role—that of social critic and commentator on contemporary American society—Mead became a media celebrity.

By the time she died, Mead had spent more time thinking, writing, and talking about American culture—crisscrossing the United States many times over giving public lectures and professional talks—than she had spent doing fieldwork in far-off places. But her perspective on American culture was firmly grounded in a cultural relativism that her early fieldwork in South Pacific cultures had afforded her, thus giving her a unique and timely vantage point. Mead brought to her role of social commentator a compelling and provocative combination: the knowledge of non-Western societies that afforded her new perspectives on human behavior coupled with her ability to use insights derived from these cultures to offer Americans new ways to think about their own society. As we will see, Mead developed this successful formula at the beginning of her career with the publication of her first book, *Coming of Age in Samoa*, and practiced it throughout her life. Underlying this strategy was her flair at communicating her insights in easily understood and entertaining prose—both in books and when speaking before an audience.

In 2005, Catherine Besterman and Hugh Gusterson, editors of *Why America's Top Pundits Are Wrong: Anthropologists Talk Back*, dedicated their volume to Margaret Mead and Franz Boas as “pioneers of public anthropology.” Furthermore, they published the book “out of the conviction that it is time for anthropologists to reclaim Margaret Mead’s legacy and find our voice as public intellectuals once more.”¹⁶

One of the goals of this book is to elucidate the nature of that legacy—how and why Mead developed into a prominent public intellectual—and to show how Mead embodied and anticipated important developments in twenty-first-century anthropology, in particular the arena of what today is referred to as *public anthropology*. Different from applied anthropology—a subfield of anthropology that emerged after World War II as a result of the wartime activities of anthropologists such as Mead who had applied anthropological methods and insights to the solution of problems facing the United States government and its allies, such as morale building, the rationing of food, and such¹⁷—public anthropology is broader in scope and more activist in orientation. Its aim is to apply anthropological methods not only to projects sponsored by governmental or international organizations, but also to issues of concern to a wide range of social sec-

tors, including those initiated by the subjects of research themselves. Moreover, public anthropologists aim to make the theoretical and descriptive insights of anthropology available in more accessible forms—the Internet, popular press, video and CDs, and so forth—and see their audience not only as government officials, administrators, or other experts and professionals, but also as the broader public.¹⁸

Mead was in the vanguard of this contemporary orientation. As a result of her research on children in Samoa and New Guinea, Mead became an expert on the lives of non-Western children and child development, sharing her expertise with professionals in the fields of psychology, early childhood development, and pediatrics. But she also wrote popular articles for *Parents* magazine, spoke at YWCAs and parents' associations, and was interviewed widely on the radio and in the popular press, because she had things to say about contemporary American children based on her insights. She was a founding member of SIPI (Scientists' Institute for Public Information), an organization dedicated to public outreach. In her seventies she was particularly concerned with issues of air quality, urbanization, and the potentially harmful effects of nuclear energy. She educated herself on these topics and spoke about them at congressional hearings and wrote about them in her column for *Redbook* magazine. Her perspective on these issues was global. Long before other Americans thought in global terms, Mead was concerned about the impact of Western technological developments on the world as a whole.¹⁹

An important premise of this book is that Mead became a media celebrity—indeed, a cultural icon—because of her skill at translating anthropological insights garnered from non-Western societies into meaningful and accessible critiques of American society. Moreover, she did so at a time when the United States was poised to take on a new role as world leader and in a manner—utilizing various forms of mass media that she engaged with humor and self-assurance—that afforded her a unique opportunity to have her voice heard as a public anthropologist.

Four Iconic Images of Mead

I focus on four categories of images that recur in media representations of Mead throughout her career and interpret what the various responses to them symbolize and tell us about American society. The categories are

Mead as Modern Woman, Mead as Anthropologist, Mead as Scientist, and Mead as Public Intellectual and Celebrity. These iconic images represent roles, values, and ideas that were important to various segments of American society at different points during the course of the twentieth century.

Each of the following chapters focuses on one of these four images of Mead and the historical contexts in which they appeared. Since in reality these images are never strictly separated one from the other, each image also contributes to and is inflected by the others. By the end of the book I hope to have shown how the density of these four categories of images combined and recombined to create a sense of Mead as bigger than life. This is how icons are created. One image upon another, the repetition of certain ideas, statements, and anecdotes about a person become both tropes and identifying characteristics; they are the stuff of caricature and iconization. Nor were these images static. It is significant that unlike the relatively unchanging meanings associated with the images of John Wayne or Marilyn Monroe, for example, as Mead grew older and times changed, the images of her—and their meanings—changed as well.

Mead as Cultural Icon

When *Time* magazine identified Margaret Mead as “an American icon” in 1999, what exactly did they mean?²⁰ And why have I chosen to use the term *icon*, especially since it has received much criticism because of its increased use in the 1990s by academics and journalists alike? Humorist Russell Baker has bemoaned the fact that “this lovely word, with its odor of incense . . . is now reduced to a pretentious way for depraved language butchers to speak of computer cartoons and entertainers and athletes once dismissed as ‘heroes’ or ‘stars.’”²¹ At the risk of sounding clichéd, I have chosen to use the term *cultural icon* to describe Mead precisely because of its use in popular discourse. William Safire has very helpfully identified three current uses of *icon*. The simplest is “a graphic representation of an idea” (the example he gives is computer icons). The second meaning is a “symbol, a sign that represents, or a token that stands for something else.” The third meaning is an “idol.” By this Safire means “a living idol, a superstar,” and the related subset of “media celebrity, the famous famed for being famous.”²² Both Safire’s second and third definitions express the sense in which the term has been used to refer to Mead.

Aspects of Mead's status as cultural icon are also similar to those Brenda Silver has identified for Virginia Woolf. Silver suggests that Woolf's elevation to the status of a "transgressive cultural icon" in the 1960s and "the contradictory often vehement, responses provoked by it," are the result of Woolf's location on the borders between high culture and popular culture.²³ Mead also has incited a range of contradictory responses, largely because she too occupies similar multiple, often-contradictory sites in our cultural discourses: 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, undeclared feminist and proponent of the family, professional career woman and champion of motherhood, a woman successful in a man's world, feminine and masculine, heterosexual and homosexual.

Her iconicity is the result in part of her ability to cross boundaries that usually separate an individual known primarily for her intellectual and scholarly contributions from the world of popular or mass culture. Mead's portrait at Disney's Epcot Center—where she symbolized science (and women scientists in particular)—or in an ad for the *Wall Street Journal* certainly represent the iconization of her image. The ad's creators assumed that readers would recognize Mead as an important intellectual, who not only used a computer (or would have, had personal computers been easily available in her lifetime), but who also relied on newspapers, in particular, the *Wall Street Journal*, for information. And, if Mead did, so should others. The ad used the fact that Mead's image and name had become associated with intelligence and expertise. At the very least, the ad's creators may have figured that even if people did not recognize Mead's image or name they would nonetheless assume that she was someone famous, knowledgeable, and important.

So too does the use of a photograph of Mead by the American Museum of Natural History in its catalogue of the museum's fifty greatest treasures. The photograph shows Mead in Bali smiling intently at a Balinese baby held in her mother's arms. As we will see, pictures like this reproduce the image of the maternal Mead, an image that speaks to her focus on the anthropological study of children and parents and also to the media's portrayal of her as "mother (and later, grandmother) to the world."²⁴

To speak of Mead as an icon is neither to trivialize her achievements nor to dehumanize her by reducing her to a symbol, but rather to suggest



Margaret Mead

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Figure I.2 *Wall Street Journal* ad, 2001. (Courtesy Dow Jones and Company, Inc.)



Figure I.3 Frequently reproduced image of Mead peering at a Balinese baby, 1957. (Courtesy of Ken Heyman)

that she has achieved a particularly distinct role in American culture, that of a representative figure. As such over the course of her lifetime, as well as after her death, images of her have circulated in popular culture and scholarly arenas that function as referents to Mead the person and also to various sets of ideas that she has come to represent to different publics and different viewers.

Time magazine also reminds us that “iconoclasm is inherent in every icon, and heroes can wear different faces in the afterlives granted them by history and remembrance.”²⁵ Long before Derek Freeman published his critique of her, Mead had been a controversial figure within academia and among the wider public. There was the paradox of her public acclaim versus some of her profession’s dismissal of her work. Why was someone who was so highly regarded by much of mainstream American society—including presidents and pundits—often denigrated within her own or related disciplines? I explore the nature of this paradox in terms of academic anthropology’s aversion to popularization, the politics of academia, and the pros and cons of Mead’s main theoretical orientation, culture and personality, as well as its later manifestation, the study of national character.²⁶

I also suggest that the contradictory meanings associated with Mead provide insight into the changing character of twentieth-century American society—and the role anthropology has played in it—with regard to social issues such as race, ethnic identity, and sexual variation.

Mead and the Media

Through the mass media—first newspapers and magazines, then radio and television, and finally through film and the Internet—Margaret Mead acquired a legendary, even mythic status in American culture in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Her books, of course, have played an important role as well. Without the books she wrote Mead would never have become as famous as she did, but fewer people ever actually read Mead’s books than saw her on television, read her column in *Redbook* magazine, or heard her speak at a lecture or over the radio.

To look at the media in relationship to Mead is to acknowledge the dominant role that visual media in particular have come to play as myth-making mechanisms in American culture. Technological developments in the nineteenth century, such as the camera—first daguerreotype, then dry-plate photography, and eventually film and the motion picture camera—heralded what scholars have identified as a “pictorial turn” in Western culture.²⁷ What they mean by this phrase is that these and other technological innovations provided the means to easily reproduce, preserve, transmit, and rapidly disseminate images. As a result, by the twentieth century everyday life in America and Europe increasingly came to be dominated by images—first in newspapers, magazines, and on billboards, postcards, and other ephemera—and then in the second half of the twentieth century on the television screen and now over the Internet.²⁸ This plethora of images contributed to America’s celebrity-focused culture, and to Mead’s fame.

The Culture of Celebrity

It is difficult these days not to see or hear a reference to celebrities or our “culture of celebrity,” or to read that everyone in America wants to be a celebrity—to have their “fifteen minutes of fame” that Andy Warhol

spoke of—or to be associated with someone famous. That this is the case has much to do with the media and the creation of visual images. Thus, one result of the “pictorial turn” has been the ability to create what Daniel Boorstin has identified as “pseudo-events.” Boorstin suggested that over the course of the twentieth century the “business” of modern American society became the creation of illusions and images with which we deceive ourselves. This business—the creation of pseudo-events and celebrities (the individual equivalents, according to Boorstin, of pseudo-events)—he said, feeds a desire the American public has for excitement and helps to sustain its insatiable appetite for extravagant expectations. It was enabled through the activities of public relations firms, press agents, the news media, popular magazines, advertising, gossip, and political rhetoric.²⁹

Since Boorstin first articulated his ideas over forty years ago, other scholars of American culture and celebrity have delineated the intimate connections between the increasing importance of the visual image, industrial capitalism, and the culture of consumption that characterizes modern American society.³⁰ They have also documented the shift in American culture from a focus on the hero or heroine, once renowned for something he or she actually did, to the cult of the celebrity characterized by the commodification of personality and style over substance. Scholars such as Neil Postman and Neal Gabler, who have looked critically at the long-term effects of mass media and the entertainment industries on American culture, have shown us in great detail the degree of degradation that public discourse has suffered and the extent to which “Real Life” has been turned into entertainment (even before the onslaught of Reality TV) as a result of our insatiable appetite for the pseudo-events and celebrity stories that Boorstin first outlined.³¹

The rise of a culture of celebrity in twentieth-century America is relevant to an understanding of Margaret Mead’s fame and the meaning she came to have to different groups of Americans. As Richard Schickel has said of celebrity, which he sees as the most vital, as well as the most distorting, force in contemporary American society: “[it is] the principle source of motive power in putting across ideas of every kind—social, political, aesthetic, moral. Famous people are used as symbols for these ideas, or become famous for being symbols of them.”³²

When Mead’s daughter, Mary Catherine Bateson, was about twelve, she complained that it was hard to have “a ‘half-famous’ mother because when I assume that people know who you are, so often they don’t.”³³

She said that in 1950, just before Mead became a frequent presence on television talk shows and in popular magazines such as *Life*, *Time*, *Redbook*, and the *New Yorker*, so much so that one journalist referred to her as “a household name.” Although Mead subsequently became even more widely known in post–World War II America, she had already achieved a degree of fame with the publication of *Coming of Age in Samoa* that was quite unusual—especially for an anthropologist—while still in her twenties. What was different later was that she was “100 percent famous,” in other words, she had become a media celebrity (so much so that she joined the American Federation of TV and Radio Artists union as the result of her increasingly frequent media appearances). She also had the ability to continually reinvent herself as an anthropologist. She came to symbolize a range of ideas and values related to the changing social and political topography of the times, as well as to her own aging body.

In addition to her symbolic value, there is a second aspect to celebrity relevant to Mead as a cultural icon: the fact that aspects of celebrities’ lives are fictionalized. Although today revealing facts about a celebrity’s personal life is de rigueur, while she was alive, Mead succeeded in keeping her private life private. In fact, one of the reasons Mead remains such a popular subject of contemporary scholarly investigation is that her public persona contrasted so greatly with her private life. Perhaps anticipating this interest, Mead kept voluminous files filled with her personal correspondence, much of which has only gradually become available to scholars as the individuals involved either die or time limits placed on the public circulation of the material expire.³⁴

But in addition to being able to explore the contrast between Mead’s public and private lives, there are also narrative fictions and frequently repeated tropes about Mead that occur again and again in newspaper articles and other popular media. These narrative devices have also created certain images of Mead and what she stands for. Mead was very media savvy, and some of these images she introduced to the media herself. For example, she often explained to an interviewer that she had acquired her skill at observing other people’s behavior by the age of eight when her mother, a social scientist, had Mead record the behavior of her younger siblings in notebooks. This anecdote is repeated time and again in different accounts of Mead, as well as in her memoir. It assumes the function of an origin story, locating Mead’s observational skills as an

anthropologist in her childhood. It also contributes to a sense of overdetermination, that, of course, Mead would become a social scientist—and one renowned for her study of child rearing in other cultures.

Such narrative details begin to function symbolically when we come to understand the role Mead eventually played in American society as an expert on the subject of how to raise American children. For, as Ann Hulbert has demonstrated in *Raising America: Experts, Parents, and a Century of Advice about Children*, in twentieth-century America, advice from experts about how to raise children was also advice about how to raise good American citizens.³⁵ At a time when reliance on expert advice about child rearing was steadily increasing, Mead, like her friend and family pediatrician, Dr. Benjamin Spock, became a symbol of how to raise a healthy, happy, and well-adjusted child in modern American society.

Mead as Writer

In 1998, when the editors of *Ladies' Home Journal* included Margaret Mead as one of their choices for the one hundred most important women of the twentieth century rather than categorize her as a scientist, they included her among the journalists and writers.³⁶ What is interesting about the magazine's decision to include Mead as a writer rather than a scientist is that it provided a convenient way for them to circumvent the controversy over the veracity of her Samoan fieldwork that Derek Freeman's book had raised in 1983. The categorization also underscored Mead's success as a popularizer of anthropology. Mead first attracted popular attention through books such as *Coming of Age in Samoa*, and because she wrote in an engaging and non-jargon-laden prose, nonspecialist readers read her books. She also became successful because she used her anthropological insights to present new perspectives on issues that readers cared about, such as American adolescents.

I do not focus specifically on the image of Mead as a writer, except to acknowledge how frequently reviewers of her books noted her felicitous writing style. However, the fact that she was an exceptionally good writer contributed greatly to her popular acclaim. While Mead thought of herself first and foremost as an anthropologist, an early aspiration had been to be a writer. Throughout her career she experimented with different

modes of writing for both professional and popular readers.³⁷ However, she was also aware that her ability to write engagingly for a popular audience had sometimes been a liability in terms of her reputation among her fellow anthropologists. Thus, for example, Colin Turnbull, Mead's colleague in the Department of Anthropology at the American Museum of Natural History, remembered her warning him of the possible backlash he might receive from his academic peers as his books *The Forest People* and *The Mountain People* achieved popular acclaim.³⁸

With regard to Mead's celebrity, however, her skill as a writer and a public speaker elevated her status from merely that of a proficient anthropologist to that of a cultural icon. As Emerson said about the writer as a representative character, it is the writer's role to re-present to the reader his world and his self, thus allowing the reader to experience him (or herself) in a new way, from a new perspective, and with new insight into himself or the world around him.³⁹ This uplifting and reinvigoration, this ability to cause her readers or her audience to gain a new understanding of themselves, or of their children or their culture, was an important aspect of Mead's popular success. So too was her ability to engage her readers or viewers in a form of transference in which they vicariously experienced some of what Mead had experienced living in other cultures. Although many anthropologists have practiced cross-cultural comparison, Mead was particularly adept at using examples from other cultures as a means of elucidating aspects of her own culture, or her own experiences, to her fellow Americans.

Mead and Visual Anthropology

Along with her third husband, anthropologist Gregory Bateson, Mead was a pioneer in the use of film and photography in her ethnographic research. As the history of anthropology is intimately linked to the development of visual culture in the West, Mead symbolizes this important relationship between anthropology and visual media.⁴⁰

Just as Mead's fame as an anthropologist was dependent upon the mass media, likewise anthropology's development as both an academic discipline and a form of popular knowledge and entertainment was closely associated with the development of new visual technologies in the nine-

teenth and twentieth centuries. In particular, the development of portable still and motion picture cameras has been intimately linked with the development of anthropology.⁴¹ Still photography and motion pictures aided both travelers and professional anthropologists to record images of exotic peoples they encountered in remote parts of the world. Many of these images were quickly reproduced for new forms of popular entertainment such as the stereoscope, lantern slides, and, once the motion picture camera was developed, travelogues and adventure movies that highlighted the cultures of non-Western peoples.⁴² Mead's use of photography and film in her research helped to underscore the importance of visual evidence in ethnographic research as well as the value of images in conveying cross-cultural information to the public.

Not only was Mead one of the earliest anthropologists to integrate visual methods into her research, she was also one of the first anthropologists to focus on the study of visual communication, including nonverbal communication, kinesics (the study of body motion), and proxemics (the study of territoriality and personal space), and she pioneered teaching anthropology courses on culture and communication (both verbal and visual).⁴³ Mead's relationship to ethnographic film (and to the American Museum of Natural History) is symbolized by the museum's use of her name and image for their annual showcase of new documentary film and video. The Margaret Mead Film Festival began in 1976 in commemoration of Mead's seventy-fifth birthday and has grown in size and importance during the past thirty years. It is now the preeminent venue for viewing nonfiction film in the country.

New York City—Cultural Hub of the World

The rise of the image and the cult of celebrity in twentieth century America were necessary but not sufficient explanations of Mead's popularity and the role she came to play in American culture. There were, of course, her skills as a writer, ethnographer, and public speaker. But other important factors also contributed to her fame, including her decision to live in New York City, her position as a curator of anthropology at the American Museum of Natural History, and the development of New York City as a center for new forms of mass media and the fields of advertising and public relations.

For Mead, New York City was the perfect counterbalance to the relatively unpopulated jungles and islands where she did her research. Personally, she loved the hustle and bustle of the city and its endless diversity; professionally, it allowed her an important perspective and rhetorical stance from which she could compare and contrast the “primitive” worlds of her fieldwork. After she arrived in there in 1920, the city remained her home until she died there in 1978. Once asked where she would prefer to live, Mead answered rather testily, “New York City, where I *do* live.”⁴⁴

New York was also home to Columbia University and Barnard College, the institutions where Mead earned her academic degrees, formed her most important professional and personal relationships, especially those with Franz Boas and Ruth Benedict, and where she taught scores of graduate and undergraduate students. At the time Mead studied there, Columbia was *the* intellectual center for the study of anthropology under the leadership of Franz Boas.

Equally significant was the fact that during the almost sixty years that Mead lived there, New York City became Capital to the World. As such, its dynamism, institutions, wealth, and cultural diversity of inhabitants all contributed to the development of Mead’s fame. During World War I New York City began to replace London as the center of a developing global economy. After World War II the city not only became the business, financial, mass media, and cultural and intellectual center of the United States (and by extension, of the world), but also, with the establishment of the United Nations in New York in 1944, an important center of international politics as well.

The most important factor for Mead’s public success was the concentration of all important forms of mass media: the publishing industry (books and magazines in particular, but also large-circulation newspapers), radio, and later television, as well as the ad agencies that sustained all these media, in New York City. In addition to being home to the *New Republic* and *The Nation*, two magazines that offered insightful criticism of American society for which Mead eventually wrote, two other important intellectually oriented national circulation magazines were based there, the *American Mercury* and the *New Yorker*. *Time* magazine was also based in New York, as was *Life*. All of these magazines at one time or another featured articles either written by Mead or about her.⁴⁵

Moreover, since the 1880s the center of the women’s magazine industry has been in New York City. In the 1920s the number of magazines for

women grew as magazine postal rates declined and the number of middle-class women, in particular, who sought advice about their changing role in American society from magazines such as *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Cosmopolitan*, *McCall's*, *Parents* magazine, and later, *Redbook*, expanded. Not only did these magazines publish articles written by Mead or about her, by 1965 she had also begun to write a regular monthly column for *Redbook* magazine.

New York City also became the center for commercial radio after the major commercial networks were formed there in the 1920s, and the cultural activities and personalities in the city influenced programming for radio networks nationwide.⁴⁶ During the 1920s, as a result of then governor of New York Franklin Delano Roosevelt's habit of discussing his political decisions over the radio, broadcasting over the radio became a more important force in politics and social issues. Thus, Mead was well situated to appear on radio programs that originated in New York City that dealt with a broad range of social issues. For example, between 1941 and 1972 she appeared repeatedly on the CBS affiliate station WOR on the *Martha Deane Show*.⁴⁷

After World War II both radio and magazines were forced to compete with television for an audience. But for Mead the advent of television simply opened a new venue and an expanded audience for her ideas. In the early days of television broadcasting, when programs still aired live, New York City was the center for most national television production. CBS even set up a production center in the American Museum of Natural History for its science series, *Adventure*, produced live at the museum between 1951 and 1957.⁴⁸ Because she was a curator of anthropology at the museum, Mead was asked to appear on several episodes of the *Adventure* series, thus launching her career as a television personality.

Mead had joined the museum at age twenty-four, before she embarked upon her first fieldwork to Samoa in 1925. At that time there were few jobs available for anthropologists. Having just completed her doctorate in anthropology, Mead was very fortunate to have received the appointment. It meant that she had a job waiting for her when she returned from the field, and she remained at the museum until her death. It also meant that the prestige of the museum and its reputation as a bastion of scientific knowledge, its masculine ethos of science, its association with adventure and expeditions, and its grand scale and labyrinthine layout, all contrib-

uted to her authority as a scientist and an expert. When writing about her, journalists who interviewed Mead in her office often referred to the building's "sacred precincts" and to her inaccessible location in the Tower Room tucked away at the top of the southwest turret of the museum.⁴⁹ The plethora of strange objects stored on shelves and stowed in nooks and crannies outside her office added to the mysterious and exotic atmosphere of the inner depths of the museum. Getting to Mead's office was an adventure that took one past museum guards, beyond the public domain of the museum, and down long, dimly lit corridors that passed by the closed doors of numerous offices and laboratories.

Clark Wissler, the curator of anthropology at the museum who had hired Mead, thought that women were well suited for curatorial work because the job was like housekeeping. But Mead's early career as a field-worker in Samoa and New Guinea also fit into the masculine image associated with the scientist-as-explorer—represented by the museum curator Roy Chapman Andrews (said to be the prototype for Indiana Jones),⁵⁰ as well as the museum's masculine iconography expressed by the large bronze statue of Teddy Roosevelt astride his horse that stands sentry over the museum's main entrance on Central Park West and the African animals in the Carl Ackley dioramas, redolent of Hemingwayesque hunting safaris.⁵¹

Finally, since the museum was a public institution, curators were expected to make their research and that of others in their field accessible to the public. Mead took this mandate seriously, writing popular ethnographic books for general readers as well as more technical scientific monographs. It was the timely and serendipitous combination of these different factors—personal, structural, and institutional—that together contributed to Mead's fame. Not only was she in the right place at the right time, she was also the right person, with the right talents, attributes and choice of career.

A Quintessentially American Icon

When she died in 1978, British anthropologist Meyer Fortes noted that "a phenomenon like Margaret Mead could perhaps not have emerged in any other country than modern America"—a reference in part to Mead's



Figure I.4 Mead's turret office at the American Museum of Natural History overlooked Columbus Avenue. Having had to hike up to it, journalists frequently commented on the office's remote location and exotic decor. (Neg. No. 338668, Courtesy of the Department of Library Services, American Museum of Natural History, New York City)

rise as a media celebrity.⁵² It was also a reference to her style—decidedly different from understated British academics in her bold and broad-sweeping pronouncements on a multitude of topics. Moreover, as a young woman and also as an elder statesperson Mead became a symbol of aspects of America itself, first as an exemplar of the twentieth century's New Woman and in old age as a wise, although sometimes cantankerous, sage. As in the tradition of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century iconography that depicted the nation as a woman, Mead in her various guises also became a symbol of the nation. An example of this symbolic role is the United States Information Agency decision in 1975 to make a film about her for distribution abroad.⁵³ Another is the fact that the U.S. government chose to send Mead to Britain during the World War II to interpret American culture to the British, who were inundated with American troops stationed throughout their country.

Mead was chosen for this job in part because in 1942 she had published her first book about American culture, *And Keep Your Powder Dry: An Anthropologist Looks at America*.⁵⁴ Written as part of the war effort to encourage American support for the war, Mead sought to identify those characteristics of Americans she felt would be most useful in fighting against fascism—and in leading the world after the war had ended. Not surprisingly, some of the most prominent aspects of what she identified as the American “national character” apply to Mead as well.⁵⁵ Mead characterized America as a moral culture, one in which the concepts of good and bad permeated discussion and behavior.⁵⁶ Similarly, Mead was a highly moral individual, not only in that she was religious—which she was (throughout her life she was closely involved with the Episcopal Church)—but also in that she sought justice and equality for all cultures and peoples of the world, and—always self-confident and assured—believed that she knew what was best for others. Mead also characterized Americans as perpetually in motion, with the expectation that they would not live where they grew up and, with their steadfast belief in progress, as always searching for a better way of life. In fact, not only did Mead leave her childhood home to move to New York City, throughout her life she was also constantly on the move, traversing the United States and the world in search of a better understanding of human behavior and ways to improve human societies. In this respect, she was convinced that anthropology had an important role to play in changing the world for the

better. Finally, Mead identified the success ethic as a primary American value. More specifically, she said that to have succeeded in American society, Americans believed that they had to surpass their parents in achievements, be they material, intellectual, or social. It could be said that Mead succeeded with a vengeance, for she wrote that when she was a child her father had remarked to her, “It’s a pity you aren’t a boy,” for “you’d have gone far!”⁵⁷

Mead’s enduring interest in other cultures, coupled with her steadfast faith in American democracy and her admonishments to her fellow Americans that they think more globally and less ethnocentrically, was a message the U.S. government was eager to transmit abroad, especially after World War II when the idea of cultural pluralism—one which Boasian anthropologists had helped champion with their idea of cultural relativism—became increasingly important to liberal American politicians.⁵⁸ These characteristics were also the reasons why President Carter awarded Mead the Medal of Freedom, posthumously.

Although a majority of Americans have viewed Mead as patriotic and well intentioned, and hence as a positive symbol of the United States and the commendable values they believe it stands for, there have been other individuals, both to the right and to the left of center politically, who have viewed Mead and her allegiance to the United States with suspicion. On the right, J. Edgar Hoover and the Federal Bureau of Investigation kept extensive files on Mead from the 1940s into the 1970s.⁵⁹ At the same time, left-leaning anthropologists and other scholars, educated Samoans and Papua New Guineans, and political satirists such as cartoonist Garry Trudeau have seen Mead as a symbol of U.S. imperialism and anthropological paternalism, whose effects have ranged from benign neglect to overt racism.⁶⁰

In the chapters that follow we will see how Mead became the American phenomenon that she did, as well as how she came to represent such a range of different ideas to various people at different points in time. In the process we will see how integral the discipline of anthropology has been to the development of modern twentieth-century American intellectual and political thought as well as popular culture, articulating a new concept of culture, ideas about the Primitive Other, as well as the concepts of the unity of humanity, cultural relativism, and equality among human societies. Although these were ideas that many anthropolo-

gists helped to shape through their research and writing, Mead played a dominant role in their popular dissemination in her role as public intellectual and celebrity and, indeed, as the discipline's most famous "public anthropologist."

This book is organized both thematically and chronologically. It is comprised of nine chapters, each of which deals with one or more of the four iconic images of Mead I have identified. Within each chapter the material is presented chronologically. Thus, chapter 1, "Mead as Modern Woman," covers Mead's infancy through her twenties, when she embarks on her first fieldwork to Samoa in 1925. It reveals that even before Mead published *Coming of Age in Samoa* she was a media figure, having made headlines in local papers from Honolulu to Philadelphia for her research studying "the flapper of the South Seas." Chapter 2, "The Image of the Mature Mead," looks at the married and the maternal Mead. It traces the changing image of Mead as a woman from the young, flapperesque Mead of the 1920s to the elderly Mead who upon her death was eulogized as "grandmother to the world." It also charts Mead's posthumous emergence as an icon of bi- and lesbian sexuality. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 deal with the image of Mead as anthropologist. Chapter 3, "Mead as Anthropologist: 'Sex in the South Seas,'" tracks the media's response to *Coming of Age in Samoa*, as well as the work she and her publisher performed to shape the book into an anthropological argument with popular appeal. With the book's publication we see the association among Mead, the study of "primitive" people, and sexuality set in motion by the media. Chapter 4, "Mead as Anthropologist: 'To Study Cannibals,'" focuses on Mead's second book, *Growing Up in New Guinea*, as well as her third, less well-known book, *The Changing Culture of an Indian Tribe*. Mead's second book cemented the association of Mead with the study of exotic non-Western people in the public's mind. The lack of popular success of her third book, about the Omaha Indians in Nebraska, underscores the point that much of the popular appeal of Mead's books was their descriptions of far-off places and exotic peoples. Chapter 5 discusses the publication of *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* in 1935 and the impact of the media's response to all three of Mead's books about South Pacific cultures. Chapter 6, "Mead and the Image of the Anthropologist," argues that twentieth-century American popular understanding of anthropologists and what

they did, although shaped by earlier nineteenth-century American anthropologists, was heavily influenced by media representations of Mead and her work, especially from the period 1928 to 1935, when she published her three Pacific ethnographies. Chapter 7, “Mead as Scientist,” concentrates on the post–World War II period and the effect that television had on the spread of Mead’s fame. It discusses the importance of film and photography in Mead’s Balinese research in terms of the use she made of this and other visual material in her television appearances. During this period Mead was transformed in the public’s mind from simply being an anthropologist who studied remote and primitive people into a social or behavioral scientist who was an expert on human behavior in general, including her own society. Chapter 8, “Mead as Public Intellectual and Celebrity,” looks at the last two decades of Mead’s life, during the 1960s and 70s, when she had become a major public figure and media celebrity whose name and face were well known in the United States and abroad. It discusses her role as a public intellectual and the reasons why an anthropologist became a celebrity in twentieth-century America. Finally, chapter 9, “The Posthumous Mead, or Mead, the Public Anthropologist,” looks at the so-called Mead-Freeman controversy and considers why Derek Freeman’s critique of Mead and *Coming of Age in Samoa* became an American media event. It also considers Mead’s symbolic role today in American culture and anthropology and discusses how the Internet, as well as more traditional forms of mass media, have created and perpetuated Mead as a quintessentially American icon.