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RALPH LINTON

1893—1953

A Biographical Memoir by
CLYDE KLUCKHOHN

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Biographical Memoir

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BY CLYDE KLUCKHOHN *

RALPH LINTON was born in Philadelphia on February 27, 1893, the son of Isaiah W. and Mary E. (Gillingham) Linton. Both parents were of old Quaker stock; they themselves were liberal Hicksites. They had attended but not graduated from the newly founded Swarthmore College. Ralph Linton spoke of his father as "the stern parent of the old style" who demanded punctilious performance of household chores and expected his son (after the age of ten) to work during all school vacations in the chain of Philadelphia restaurants owned by the father. Late in life Linton sometimes recalled with considerable heat his father's having bought him a secondhand *girl's* bicycle because it was cheaper. Neither parent seems to have had intellectual or scientific interests, but they did subscribe to a number of periodicals and read light fiction.

Linton himself read omnivorously from early childhood. He also soon became a collector—initially of arrowheads and minerals. He attended Moorestown Friends' High School. In his opinion, instruction at this school at this time was "exceedingly poor." While there, Linton "never felt any necessity for study and no particular interest in any of the courses which were offered. If I had any preferences, they were for courses in literature and history." At Swarthmore, Linton was once on probation and under threat of suspension for poor grades. Spencer Trotter, M.D., a member of the faculty, pre-

* Thanks are due to Professor David Stout of the University of Iowa, a pupil and close personal friend of Linton's, for contributing some informal details and for checking the manuscript for factual accuracy.

vailed on the college authorities to relax the rules on the ground that Linton had done good work in the natural sciences and showed considerable general promise. Linton's own reminiscences of his undergraduate days referred to this incident, to the amount of reading he did, and to the fact that he always dressed conservatively (blue serge suit, white shirt, red tie).

Linton graduated from Swarthmore College in 1915, already committed to anthropology and experienced in anthropological field work. The person at Swarthmore most strongly influential in directing Linton toward anthropology was Dr. Trotter, who taught general science courses and was a passionate exponent of the unity of science. Linton said more than once that his primary conscious and rational motive for going into anthropology was because of the invitation to synthesis. Some aspects of anthropology had their roots in biology and in the earth sciences; other sides of anthropology reached over into the arts and literature. Anyone who knew firsthand the wide scope of Ralph Linton's personal interests and knowledge could understand at once the appeal anthropology had for him.

During the summer of 1912, Linton did archeological field work in New Mexico and southern Colorado. That winter he assisted in excavations and in the making of casts of Maya monuments at Quirigua in Guatemala. In the summer following his graduation from Swarthmore, he excavated an archaic site near Haddonfield, New Jersey. It was the first time that an archeological culture of this period had been identified south of New England, and the finding created some little stir of controversy. During the summer of 1916, Linton assisted in excavations at Aztec, New Mexico, for the American Museum of Natural History. After two years of army service, he was demobilized in 1919, and assisted in the excavation of Square Tower House in Mesa Verde National Park. He likewise discovered and identified a Basket Maker III dwelling with associated artifacts. Previous archeological work on Mesa Verde had been preoccupied with the "cliff houses" of the later period. Linton's work on Earth Lodge A served to place the investigations on Mesa Verde in wider perspective.

The years 1920–1922 were spent in the Marquesas Islands on an expedition for the Bernice P. Bishop Museum of Honolulu. Linton's role in this expedition had been planned as that of archeologist, but the paucity of archeological remains and the interest aroused by the contemporary Marquesan culture turned Linton to ethnology. While he continued to be interested in archeology, Linton was from this time on primarily a student of living culture. However, his next field work (1924) was archeological: an investigation of the original Hopewell site in Ohio. In 1925 he went to Madagascar as a one-man Captain Marshall Field Madagascar Expedition and spent the next two and a half years on that island, making ethnological collections and studying a selected series of native tribes. From Madagascar he crossed to Portuguese East Africa and spent some time in Mashena Land and Rhodesia. During the late twenties and early thirties, Linton spent several summers doing or supervising archeological field work in northern Wisconsin under the joint auspices of the Milwaukee Public Museum and the University of Wisconsin. In the summer of 1934 he had charge of the Laboratory of Anthropology's expedition to the Comanche Indians in Oklahoma. This was Linton's last major effort in the field, although after this he traveled widely, observing peoples and visiting museums and archeological excavations.

His more formal professional education, partly preceding, partly following military service, was obtained at the University of Pennsylvania, Columbia, and Harvard. He took the M.A. at Pennsylvania in 1916. During the winter of 1916–17, he studied at Columbia with Boas, who undoubtedly had some influence upon Linton, although the two were never close. Linton's training was interrupted by two years of service in Battery D, 149th Field Artillery, 42nd Division (Rainbow) with the rank of corporal. In France he was gassed and, as a result, was plagued for the rest of his life with mild respiratory troubles. On the basis of his military experience he published "Totemism and the A.E.F." (1924). Anthropological folklore has it that Linton angered Boas by returning to Boas's classes at Columbia in uniform, and that Boas excluded Linton from the courses. At any

rate, Linton began his graduate work at Harvard during the academic year 1919-1920, receiving the Ph.D. in 1925. His feelings toward Harvard were, and remained, somewhat ambivalent. He regarded Harvard, or at any rate the members of the Department of Anthropology and Museum there, as too conventional or "stuffy" for his taste. And he believed, mistakenly, in large part, that they regarded him as brash and "uncouth." Yet he continued to pay visits to the Harvard group, including his old teachers, not infrequently and seemed to enjoy them.

Linton's first regular professional position was as Assistant Curator in charge of the North American Indian collections of the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago. He was on the staff of this museum from 1922 until 1928, when he became associate professor at the University of Wisconsin. He was professor of anthropology at Madison from 1929 until 1937, when he moved to Columbia to occupy the chair from which Franz Boas had just retired. He was chairman of the Department of Anthropology at Columbia for several years after 1938. In 1946 he became Sterling Professor of Anthropology at Yale.

Linton served at various times on the National Research Council, the Social Science Research Council, and the American Council of Learned Societies. He was vice-president (Section H) of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in 1937 and president of the American Anthropological Association in 1946. He edited the *American Anthropologist* from 1939 to 1944 and the Viking Fund *Publications in Anthropology* from 1947 to 1951. Linton was elected to the National Academy of Sciences in 1945 and, during 1948-50, he was chairman of the anthropology section.

He received the Viking Fund Medal and Award in General Anthropology for 1951. In November, 1953, as the second nonmedical man to receive this honor, he delivered the Thomas William Salmon Lectures to the American Medical Association on the subject of "Culture and Medical Disorders." He had been designated as the Huxley Memorial Lecturer and Medalist of the Royal Anthropological In-

stitute of Great Britain and Ireland for 1954, an honor received by only a very few other Americans.

Linton was interested in and could deal competently with most branches of anthropology. Although he published nothing of a technical nature on biological anthropology, he often attended meetings of the American Association of Physical Anthropologists. In archeology, he published a few papers of considerable significance, but the total number of pages is disproportionate to the sizable number of months he spent during his life in archeological research. Most of this work was either not published or was, at any rate, not published under Linton's authorship. Nevertheless, he had an impressively comprehensive and detailed knowledge of the archeology of many parts of both hemispheres. This knowledge he fused with his wide-ranging ethnological information to reconstruct culture history on a broad scale, most notably in his posthumously published book, *The Tree of Culture*.

Prior to his going to the University of Wisconsin, Linton's main interests seem to have been in problems immediately related to cultural history: material culture, the distribution and diffusion of culture elements, environmental influences, and ecological adaptations. The interest in history and in the products of history continued to the end of his life. He was a collector in adulthood as well as in boyhood. He was a connoisseur of precious and semiprecious stones. His various collections were displayed in his homes in Madison and New York City. The Linton apartment in New Haven was full of sensitively selected objects which any museum might envy. There was a particularly fine collection of native African masks. He communicated his interests in aesthetics and in collecting to a number of his favorite students. His astonishing capacity of identifying artifacts from all continents with specificity and precision won the admiration of his colleagues and made him a frequent and versatile performer on the television show, "What in the World?"

But from his Wisconsin period onward, his flair for history and for "things" was paralleled by an ever-widening grasp of sociology, psychology, and the other behavioral sciences that share common terri-

tory of investigation with anthropology. He ceased to devote himself solely to historical sequences and events in all their particularity and sought for the discoverable abstract regularities in social and cultural life. Some of his Madison colleagues, such as Kimball Young in sociology and social psychology and Clark Hull and Harry Harlow in psychology, had a great influence upon him during these years. He was also much stimulated by the famous British social anthropologist, A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, who came to teach at the University of Chicago in 1929. Radcliffe-Brown held firmly that social anthropology was a natural science which must build inductively a body of abstract theory comparable to that of the other sciences. While Linton never became as doctrinaire on this point as Radcliffe-Brown, the general point of view nevertheless tinged his thought from this time onward.

In 1936, Linton published *The Study of Man*, which to the end of his life he continued to regard as his finest single work. Although this is not in the pejorative sense of the term a "textbook," many teachers of anthropology continue to feel, on the basis of experience, that after twenty years this is still the most effective introduction to general anthropology for undergraduates. It is clearly and excellently written, beautifully organized, full of fresh ideas and rich in appropriate facts, not only profoundly integrating within the branches of anthropology, but also encompassing much that is of relevance in sociology, biology, psychology, geography, and other fields. It presents simply but accurately (as of that date) man's nature as an animal and his place in the world of nature. It draws successfully upon learning theory. Throughout it demonstrates an extraordinary capacity to assess evidence judiciously and to integrate it clearly and boldly but without appreciable distortion. Concrete examples chosen are often picturesque without being played up in a journalistic manner. They reach the imagination of the reader and fix the significant theoretical points.

At Columbia there began a period of collaboration in seminars, research, and writing with Abram Kardiner, a psychiatrist-psychanalyst. This work was reported in two widely read and influential

books: *The Individual and His Society* and *Psychological Frontiers of Society*. The interest in "culture and personality" was a major focus of the last fifteen years of Linton's life and is represented by a number of well-known articles, together with the books *The Cultural Background of Personality* and *Culture and Mental Disorders*. But if this was the main stream during this period, it was certainly not the only stream. Linton organized and edited three noteworthy symposia: *Acculturation among Seven North American Indian Tribes*, *The Science of Man in the World Crisis*, and *Most of the World*. His interest in "primitive" art continued. He published a first-rate piece—too little known outside literary circles—on this subject in the *Kenyon Review* (1941). He assisted in the preparation and installation of an exhibition of arts from the South Seas at the Museum of Modern Art and reported on this in the volume *Art of the South Seas*.

While Linton was on the east coast, he had mutually significant intellectual contacts with the sociologist, Talcott Parsons. The results of these, so far as Linton was concerned, appear in scattered places in his writings and in two innovating papers, "A Neglected Aspect of Social Organization" (1940) and "Age and Sex Categories" (1942). Particularly during the final years of his life, Linton was also preoccupied with values, especially universal values, and with the problem of cultural relativity. These interests are reflected in his papers in the Anshen (1952) and Wallis (1954) volumes.

Of the principal fields in cultural anthropology Linton contributed significantly to all save these few: folklore, kinship (in the narrow, technical sense), and linguistics. His pages on language in *The Study of Man* are readable, vivid, and sound, but he did not keep up with the exciting developments in structural linguistics during the last twenty years of his life. This appears to have been the only major blind spot in the man who was so avid for knowledge and so skillful in mastering it. His "photographic" memory deserved that abused word "phenomenal." He once came with me into the smoking room of the Peabody Museum of Harvard University. I introduced to Professor Linton a graduate student who happened to be there. As was his custom, Linton immediately asked the student on what he was

currently working. The student replied, "On social organization as this can be studied in the Icelandic sagas." Linton promptly began an immensely technical discussion, quoting long passages verbatim from the documents.

Linton likewise had a startling capacity to get quickly and efficiently the conceptual and factual essentials of complicated problems. Perhaps he did this even more effectively with the oral than with the written word. This was one of the reasons that he spent a great deal of his time in attendance at professional meetings and gatherings and in extended informal talks with students and colleagues. He came close to remembering everything he had heard or read, though not necessarily from whom he had heard it or where he had read it. This is possibly the reason that he was somewhat cavalier about the conventional apparatus of scholarship. *The Study of Man* contains one (incomplete) footnote and a bibliography that does not at all do justice to the richness of sources of which there is abundant internal evidence. Others of his principal works possess only a few footnotes and sketchy bibliographies.

Linton wrote far better than the vast majority of "social scientists." This is a partial explanation of the extent of his impact. The clarity (and sometimes elegance) of his style caused his books to be read through to the end by humanists and others who would impatiently toss away a book of equally valuable content, marred by obscurities, cumbersome sentences, and triteness or cheapness of expression.

Ralph Linton's life and work had a literary as well as a scientific side. He produced some poetry of genuine distinction. His work was published in the *Atlantic Monthly*, the *Reader's Digest*, and in the select literary reviews. With his wife, Adelin Linton, he wrote a considerable number of popular articles and books.

One of his favorite recreations was the theatre, on which he was extremely well informed and competently critical. He was likewise something of a gourmet and a "trencherman." Both at home and in restaurants he would order enormous but discriminatingly selected and expensive meals. He had expensive tastes of all kinds.

Linton was an exceedingly effective teacher. His undergraduate

courses were immensely popular in every university in which he taught. He spoke without notes and apparently without effort. In fact, his lectures had been planned and organized and documented with great care. He prepared detailed notes in advance on every lecture and "talk" he gave. His lectures might have been published almost exactly as he delivered them. As an undergraduate teacher, he drew to his subject a number of persons who had no previous thought of professional work in anthropology. As a teacher of graduate students, Linton was very generous of his time and he followed the future careers of his students, providing support at appropriate moments. He took a number of graduate students to live in his own home and devoted much time to them. Students who took their doctorates under Linton remained his devoted admirers and, often, his close friends. He likewise greatly influenced students who spent only a summer with him in the field. There are many stories from these periods.

On ethnological trips, Linton would do all or most of the interviewing of informants himself, letting the students take the notes. Students who wished to obtain material on a subject that Linton found uninteresting or unimportant were blocked by Linton's deft handling of the questions so that he could say to the student group, "You see; the informant knows nothing about that."

As a person within the professional circle, Linton was probably at his best with those younger than himself. With his elders he had something of an "authority figure" problem and with his contemporaries he was somewhat competitive. This last statement, however, should be qualified in two particulars: he had exceedingly cordial relationships with many colleagues from other fields; he also had some close and lasting friendships with anthropologists of his own age. In general, though, Linton was a little "touchy" and sometimes suspicious with his seniors and with possible "rivals." These attitudes seem to have been intensified in his relationships with certain distinguished women anthropologists, although in his personal life Linton was much admired by women and got along famously with

them if issues touching on professional rivalry did not arise. In any case, he was extraordinarily generous with younger anthropologists—and not only his own students in the formal sense, as the present writer can testify. He went far out of his way to open doors for younger men and women and to help them secure teaching or research opportunities that would further their potentialities.

Outside academic and professional life, Linton was warm and outgoing, genuinely interested in all kinds of people, and able to put every sort of man, woman, and child at ease. Only a few days before his death he wrote the following sentences which well express his basic philosophy:

“Fortunately, as an ethnologist I have always been able to combine business with pleasure and have found my greatest satisfaction in friendships with men of many different races and cultures. I consider as my greatest accomplishments that I am an adopted member of the Comanche tribe, was accepted as a master carver by the Marquesan natives and executed commissions for them in their own art, am a member of the Native Church of North America (Peyote) according to the Quapaw rite, became a properly accredited *ombissy nkazo* (medicine man) in Madagascar, and was even invited to join the Rotary Club of a middle western city.”

Linton has an honorable place as a harvester in the anthropological field. The contributions to ethnology from his own field work among the Marquesans, Comanche, and natives of Madagascar are considerable. But he deserves a still higher place as a servant of the anthropological profession, as an integrator of the ideas and facts produced by others, and as a theorist. His own field work was perhaps even less completely published than is usual in the (regrettably low) average among cultural anthropologists. His major field monograph (on the Tanala of Madagascar) has excellent data and brings out some functional interrelationships, but lacks comprehensiveness of coverage and exhibits a number of internal inconsistencies.

As an editor of the *American Anthropologist* and of the *Viking Fund Publications in Anthropology*, as an organizer of symposia, as

an officer of professional societies, as an initiator and supervisor of the field work of others, Linton made notable contributions. He was a "discoverer" of ideas and of younger anthropologists of promise. He brought about the juxtaposition of facts and theories that would otherwise have remained for some time in separate universes of discourse. He forced the critical and conceptual review of many matters that had too long been left unevaluated. He compelled some anthropologists both to put their own materials together and to look at them in the light of data and concepts from neighboring disciplines. He made brilliant forays into areas, such as archeology, that were not primarily his own, raising questions that troubled the specialists and set them to constructive work, much of which is still going on.

Linton's own direct contribution came specially in the development of concepts (either new or reformulated) for the collection and analysis of anthropological data. He treated status and role in challenging ways that influenced the sociologists at least as much as the anthropologists. He proposed categories for the more systematic analysis of participation in culture and for the segregation of cultural elements as universals, alternatives, or specialties. He clarified some, though not all, of the muddled waters of "culture and personality." From his 1922 argument for the close historical relationship between Marquesan and Maori cultures to the case he makes for an independent Neolithic in Southeast Asia in his posthumous *Tree of Culture*, Linton set forth historical as well as theoretical propositions which stimulated and will continue to stimulate much fruitful research. This last-named book attempts to bring an approach to culture history into line with contemporary biological theory. He speaks of "three basic mutations" in the history of human culture, of small, cumulative changes related to small variations in selection.

While Linton enjoyed his own life and loved his profession, his views about the immediate future of Western civilization were tinged with gentle pessimism. *The Study of Man* is dedicated to "the Next Civilization," and the book closes as follows:

"Unless all history is at fault, the social scientist will go the way

of the Greek philosopher. However, he also will leave a heritage of technique for investigation and of discerned but unsolved problems; a new frontier from which free minds will sometimes press forward again into the unknown. When this time comes, perhaps after centuries of darkness and stagnation, men will look back to us as we look back to the Greeks. It is for this reason that I have dedicated this book to the next civilization.”

The Tree of Culture, published nineteen years later, ends on a similar note:

“The hope of the modern worker in the social sciences is that during this period of really surprising freedom—because periods of freedom are rare in world history—we may be able to get far enough ahead to lay a solid platform from which the workers in the next civilization can get on.”

Professor Linton died on Christmas Eve, 1953, after an evening at the theatre. He had suffered from serious heart attacks for about eight years, but had made few concessions to this ailment in the pace of his life. He is survived by his widow, Adelin Sumner Briggs Linton, and by his son from an earlier marriage.

KEY TO ABBREVIATIONS

- Am. Anth.=American Anthropologist
 Am. Antiq.=American Antiquity
 Am. J. Soc.=American Journal of Sociology
 Am. Mag. Art=American Magazine of Art
 Am. Mercury=American Mercury
 Am. Soc. Rev.=American Sociological Review
 Atlantic Mo.=Atlantic Monthly
 J. Ab. Soc. Psychol.=Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology
 J. Polynes. Soc.=Journal of the Polynesian Society
 J. Soc. Phil.=Journal of Social Philosophy
 Res. Pub. Assoc. Res. Ner. Ment. Dis.=Research Publications of the Association for Research in Nervous and Mental Diseases
 Sat. Rev. Lit.=Saturday Review of Literature
 Sci. Am.=Scientific American
 Sci. Mo.=Scientific Monthly
 Trans. N. Y. Acad. Sci.=Transactions of the New York Academy of Sciences

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