

Margaret Mead: The Making of an American Icon. Nancy Lutkehaus. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008. 392 pp.*

Reviewed by Howard Brick

In 1978, a newspaper editor celebrated the common anniversary of two distinctly “American” achievements: fifty years before, Mickey Mouse first appeared on the screen and anthropologist Margaret Mead published *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928). The editorial was prompted by Mead’s death that year at age 76, and the point was not to suggest that *Coming of Age* was cartoonish (though Mead’s Samoan sojourn gave rise over the years to numerous wry *New Yorker* cartoons and some critics considered her portrait of South Pacific adolescent sexuality simplified or fabricated). Rather, the editorial intended to suggest the rare celebrity Mead had achieved—comparable to Walt Disney, but in the roles of scholar, commentator on American culture and public affairs, and much-admired representative woman. As observers today lament the decline of “public intellectuals” in American life, Nancy Lutkehaus reminds us that it was Mead who filled that role with more vigor and prominence than almost any other figure of the 20th century. How Mead managed to do that—starting out in her twenties as a practitioner of an upstart science, a seemingly innocent exponent of something like free love, and a person whose discretion veiled what would have struck many at the time as a scandalous personal life—makes for quite a story and an enigma in the history and sociology of modern publicity. In this wonderfully illustrated book, Lutkehaus, once a young aide to Margaret Mead at the American Museum of Natural History and now Anthropology Department chair at the University of Southern California, carries off the narrative and the analysis of Mead’s “iconicity” with learning, clarity, and panache.

Mead had the advantages of an old New England heritage, a father and mother who were both scholars (in economics and sociology, respectively), social connections with other elite families, and a career at Barnard College and Columbia University in the wake of World War I when a moderated mixture of feminism, bohemianism, and political radicalism gave her and her friends both ambition and a critical edge. Drawn to anthropology by Ruth Benedict (her sometime lover in the 1920s) and advised by Franz Boas to test cultural relativism by examining the lives of adolescent girls in American Samoa, Mead won early press attention as a daring adventurer ready to explain matters of sexual ethics relevant to the age of the American “flapper.” Encouraged by her publisher, Mead added to her ethnography of Samoa two chapters concerning the American scene, and thus established the model of scientific expertise and popular commentary that kept her in the public eye for decades thereafter.

It was not only her accessible writing style that helped win her wide exposure, public respect, and finally affection as “fond grandmother to the global village” (as *Time* put it [p. 2]). Mead created and maintained a stance in public life that signaled (by her routine references to “we Americans”) her belonging *within* a cultural mainstream against which she often personally rebelled. She deftly couched her social and cultural criticism in familiar terms. For *Life* magazine in 1959, she wrote, “We have refused to recognize the creativity of youth. We don’t want our

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children to write poetry or go to the stars. We want them to go steady, get married and have four children” (p. 70). Thus she tweaked gender, family, and sexual norms while citing success and achievement ethics (defined in humanistic ways) that appealed to many Americans. A decade earlier, when asked to comment on Alfred Kinsey’s controversial *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin 1948), she emerged (to Kinsey’s surprise) as a critic, regarding the book as *too conventional*. It offered “norms and ranges” of behavior that simply by their scientific aura “give us security,” while Kinsey avoided even “a single suggestion that sex is any fun” (pp. 169-170). Evidently a liberal modernist and a critic of ethnocentrism, Mead rarely offered anything archly oppositional. In the 1960s and 1970s her criticism of the Vietnam War, support for environmental activism, and endorsement of marijuana legalization gave her the image of a dissenter, while her monthly columns for the middle-class women’s magazine, *Redbook*, upheld her respectability.

Lutkehaus ably illuminates the main controversies that dogged Mead. Her early works were criticized by more established male disciples of Franz Boas for overeasy generalizations about the cultural traits of other peoples and for unprofessional indulgence in audience-pleasing cultural comparisons with contemporary American life. Despite being the American anthropologist who most effectively demonstrated variability in cultural definitions of gender roles (and even though she provided a model of independent womanhood), Mead was assailed by Betty Friedan as a traitor to feminism for conceding some social significance to male and female biological differences and championing the maternal role. Lutkehaus also diagnoses the controversy begun after Mead’s death by New Zealander anthropologist Derek Freeman, who denounced her findings of sexual liberation in Samoa as baseless and fraudulent.

Even if Mead’s method of analysis was sometimes too casual, Lutkehaus concludes, her expertise and rigor in gathering ethnographic data were of a very high order. In effect rebutting Friedan, Lutkehaus hails Mead’s importance as a pioneer of feminist anthropology. And Freeman’s charges are easily parried: whatever errors or exaggerations appeared in *Coming of Age*, most American anthropologists have defended Mead’s integrity and her principal argument on the cultural variability of norms against Freeman’s incoherent sociobiological leanings. The more recent criticism by postmodern and postcolonial anthropologists that Mead’s work shows complicity in Western, and particularly American, imperialism receives more passing attention. This book dwells on “reception,” measured in reviews of Mead’s books, letters to her by television viewers, and public controversy. Readers will not find here a close textual analysis of the meaning of “primitive” in Mead’s discourse or of her ambivalent views on the impact of “modernization” on non-Western societies.

Finally, the author recognizes Mead’s legacy as a practitioner of visual anthropology—in path breaking ethnographic films and her adept uses of television. Above all, Mead’s brilliance, wit, and finesse established her as “the only anthropologist to have become a household name in America” (p. 205), who is unlikely ever to have a successor.

References Cited

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