

# Anthropological Tourists

## Mead & the Young Sex Mavens

**B**ack in the Roaring Twenties, Columbia University's Franz Boas (1858–1942), the “father of American anthropology,” was maneuvering to break what he called the “shackles that tradition has laid upon us.” To that end, Boas supported the “field work” of young anthropology students, including Margaret Mead, who set out to prove what Boas wanted her to prove: that happy primitive people had better sex, younger, than uptight Westerners.

In 1925, the 23-year-old Mead, recently married to the first of her three husbands, went to Samoa, stayed for less than a year, and returned to the U.S. claiming that Samoan society was an “uninhibited,” free-sex society with no jealousy, no rape, and great sex. On the basis of this exploit, she got her Ph.D. and eventually became one of the most celebrated of all anthropologists.

Mead described her sexual paradise in *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928), a book that caught the attention of a young New Zealand-born anthropologist, Derek Freeman. Expecting to find the sexual utopia Mead had depicted, he went to Samoa in 1940 and lived there for three years, studying and working as a schoolteacher.

### No Paradise

To his considerable disappointment, Freeman (later a professor at the Australian National University) found that Mead was wrong. After years of doing his own field research, he published *Margaret*

*Mead and Samoa: The Making and Unmaking of an Anthropological Myth* in 1983. In the preface he admits:

In my early work I had, in my unquestioning acceptance of Mead's writings, tended to dismiss all evidence that ran counter to her findings. By the end of 1942, however, it had become apparent to me that much of what she had written about the inhabitants of Manu'a in eastern Samoa did not apply to the people of western Samoa. . . . Many educated Samoans . . . had become familiar with Mead's writings about their culture . . . [and] entreated me, as an anthropologist, to correct her mistaken depiction of the Samoan ethos.

A fierce storm erupted when Harvard University Press published the book, which many saw as

attacking an anthropological icon. But Freeman persevered, and in 1999 published *The Fateful Hoaxing of Margaret Mead*, in which he retraced Mead's brief time on the islands of Manu'a in the mid-1920s and revealed her fieldwork as an anthropological fantasy designed to confirm the theories of her mentors, Franz Boas and Ruth Benedict.

Mead had interviewed, at best, 68 girls through an interpreter, as she knew little Samoan. Freeman, who learned the language well, found that Samoans customarily joke and inflate talk of sexual behavior. On one particular occasion, in answer to Mead's suggestive questions, two *Christian* Samoan young women laughingly said they had wild, uninhibited, and promiscuous sex. Mead took their facetious answers seriously, and used them as the basis for her depiction of their island as a paradise of free sex with no jealousy and no rape. But Freeman found that jealousy and rape were not uncommon and that a girl's virginity was critical for marriage.

Even after the publication of *Hoaxing*, many refused to accept Freeman's findings and still teach Mead's bad research today. Yet Freeman's obituary (he died in 2001) in the *New York Times* acknowledged: “His challenge was initially greeted with disbelief or anger, but gradually won wide—although not complete—acceptance.”

### Ford & Beach

Margaret Mead was not the only source of suspect findings that made their way into mainstream anthropology, and from there into American society after World War II. Drs. Clellan Ford and Frank Beach were, like Boas and Mead, determined to rid the world of Western sexual mores.

Ford, who took his Ph.D. from Yale in sociology and later taught there, lived on the Fiji islands for

one year in the mid-1930s; in 1940, he visited the Kwakiutl Indians of Vancouver Island in British Columbia, and later published a book about their leader. That is the extent of his fieldwork.

Frank Beach began his academic career by studying the sexual behavior of rats and later became a psycho-biologist. He was a grantee of the National Research Council's Committee for Research in Problems of Sex, a Rockefeller agency that also funded Alfred Kinsey.

In 1951, Ford and Beach published *Patterns of Sexual Behavior*, a book that quoted Kinsey's sex "findings" 28 times to shore up their claim that Americans are sexually prudish publicly but licentious privately. *The Chicago Tribune's* blurb on the dust jacket claimed: "What Kinsey did for the American male, Ford and Beach have done for men and women the world over."

But Beach and Ford didn't depend entirely on Kinsey's fraud; they also claimed that abundant anthropological studies proved that Judeo-Christian sexual "shackles" are abnormal and that early, undifferentiated sex is normal. It was largely assumed that these detailed island studies were Ford's and Beach's own research. Not exactly. Apart from Ford's two brief stints in the field, neither man is recorded as having lived for any period of time outside the rarified ambiance of a well-heeled, urbane, university town.

No, the studies they relied upon have roots going back to 1937, when anthropologists at the Yale Institute of Human Relations attempted to catalogue 190 different exotic societies. The "research" for this catalogue came from unnamed young college students' theses and dissertations on primitive societies in "Oceania, Eurasia; Africa; North America [largely Indians] and South America." In the 1920s and 1930s, these student "anthropologist tourists" visited

a locale, alone or with a friend, to fulfill a school assignment and satisfy their curiosity. Most would stay in the "field" for only a few months—at best up to a year. It does not appear that any of the students doing those "field studies" knew the native languages; thus, like Margaret Mead, they relied on paid and unpaid natives to translate some of the most sensitive information.

Who these Ivy League kids were—and exactly what they were doing and with whom while in these exotic climes—is not included in the "field reports," but what they brought back was counted as solid scientific research and was used by many as the basis for books, articles, and university lectures preaching about the need to free ourselves from Western sexual inhibitions.

This stack of unverified social and sexual "research" was rebaptized as "evidence" by Ford and two others in 1937 as the Yale Cross-Cultural Survey, a project later incorporated into the Human Relations Area Files. At that point, Ford and Beach sat down and summarized the exotica. And by adding and making comparisons with Kinsey's fraudulent data, they created the "classic" 1951 anthropological text we know as *Patterns of Sexual Behavior*, released three years after Kinsey's *Male* volume was published.

## A Dubious Classic

Ford and Beach's book was a hit among the academic elite and has been mined as historical and ethnographic gold ever since. In 1996, the American Psychological Association (APA) published a "retrospective" of *Patterns of Sexual Behavior* in its journal, *Contemporary Psychology*. The article hailed *Patterns* as "A Classic in Every Sense of the Word":

[Ford and Beach] accomplished the goal of com-



paring sexual behaviors in widely diverging societies by drawing on data from 190 different cultures, as well as from contemporary American society as it was known in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The cultures reported in this volume come from all corners of the globe, and in several instances, data from multiple cultures within a single society are presented.

Still today, almost sixty years after it was published, *Patterns* continues to be quoted as an authoritative work. Yet the "data" collected for this classic came from anonymous student "researchers" who were about as reliable as Margaret Mead. Her bias was obvious ("I think the nuclear family is an abomination"), and so was that of Boas, Beach, and Ford. And the APA.

It's all bad data, *not* science, combined with wishful thinking. After all, according to Mead, Frank, Beach, Kinsey, and assorted lark student anthropological tourists, if we would just dump our old sexual taboos, we'd all be living in a sexual paradise.

It's been sixty years; are we there yet? ☹