

m a r g a r e t m e a d

cultural  
transformation—

Manus,  
1928–1953



*new lives  
for old*

With an Introduction by Stewart Brand

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Perennial

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*Dedicated in 1977 to  
His Honour Judge Phillips  
Chief Justice of the Territory  
of Papua and New Guinea*

# *plates*

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# *words for a new century*

by **Mary Catherine Bateson**

When my mother, Margaret Mead, was ready to seek a publisher for her first book, *Coming of Age in Samoa*, she found her way to William Morrow, the head of a new publishing company, and he gave her a key suggestion for the rest of her career, that she add “more about what all this means to Americans.” This set a course she followed throughout her life, establishing not only the appeal of anthropology as a depiction of the exotic but as a source of self-knowledge for Western civilization. The last chapter of *Coming of Age* laid out a theme for the years ahead: “Education for Choice.”

Even before World War II, still using the terminology of her time that now seems so outmoded and speaking of “primitives” or even of “savages,” she believed that Americans should learn not only about the peoples of the Pacific, but from them. And after almost every field trip she went back to William Morrow, now HarperCollins, where many of her books have remained in print

ever since, offering new meanings to new generations of Americans. A century after her birth, they are offered once again, now for a new millennium, and today they still have much to offer on how individuals mature in their social settings and how human communities can adapt to change.

Several of Mead's field trips focused on childhood. Writers have been telling parents how to raise their children for centuries; however, the systematic observation of child development was then just beginning, and she was among the first to study it cross-culturally. She was one of those feminists who have combined an assertion of the need to make women full and equal participants in society with a continuing fascination with children and a concern for meeting their needs. A culture that repudiated children "could not be a good culture," she believed. [*Blackberry Winter: My Earlier Years*, New York: William Morrow and Company, 1972, p. 206.]

After studying adolescents in Samoa, she studied earlier childhood in Manus (*Growing Up in New Guinea*) and the care of infants and toddlers in Bali; everywhere she went, she included women and children, who had been largely invisible to earlier researchers. Her work continues to affect the way parents, teachers, and policy makers look at children. I, for one, am grateful that what she learned from the sophisticated and sensitive patterns of childcare she observed in other cultures resonated in my own childhood. Similarly, I have been liberated by the way her interest in women as mothers expanded into her work on gender (*Sex and Temperament* and *Male and Female*).

In addition to this growing understanding of the choices in gender roles and childrearing, the other theme that emerged from her fieldwork was change. The first postwar account of fieldwork that she brought to her longtime publisher described her 1953 return to the Manus people of New Guinea, *New Lives for Old*. This was not a book about how traditional cultures are eroded and damaged by change but about the possibility of a society choosing change and giving a direction to their own futures. Mead is sometimes labeled a "cultural determinist" (so obsessed

are we with reducing every thinker to a single label). The term does reflect her belief that the differences in expected behavior and character between societies (for instance, between the Samoans and the Manus) are largely learned in childhood, shaped by cultural patterns passed on through the generations that channel the biological potentials of every child, rather than by genetics. Because culture is a human artifact that can be reshaped, rather than an inborn destiny, she was not a simple determinist, and her convictions about social policy always included a faith in the human capacity to learn. After the 1950s, Mead wrote constantly about change, how it occurs, and how human communities can maintain the necessary threads of connection across the generations and still make choices. In that sense, hers was an anthropology of human freedom.

Eventually, Mead wrote for Morrow the story of her own earlier years, *Blackberry Winter*, out of the conviction that her upbringing by highly progressive and intellectual parents had made her “ahead of her time,” so that looking at her experience would serve those born generations later. She never wrote in full of her later years, but she did publish a series of letters, written to friends, family, and colleagues over the course of fifty years of fieldwork, that bring the encounter with unfamiliar cultures closer to our own musings. Although *Letters from the Field* was published elsewhere, by Harper & Row, corporate metamorphoses have for once been serendipitous and made it possible to include *Letters from the Field* in this HarperCollins series, where it belongs. Mead often wrote for other publishers, but this particular set of books was linked by that early desire to spell out what her personal and professional experience could and should mean to Americans. That desire led her to write for *Redbook* and to appear repeatedly on television, speaking optimistically and urgently about our ability to make the right choices. Unlike many intellectuals, she was convinced of the intelligence of general readers, just as she was convinced of the essential goodness of democratic institutions. Addressing the public with respect and affection, she became a household name.



Margaret Mead's work has gone through many editions, and the details of her observations and interpretations have been repeatedly critiqued and amended, as all pioneering scientific work must be. In spite of occasional opportunistic attacks, her colleagues continue to value her visionary and groundbreaking work. But in preparing this series, we felt it was important to seek introductions outside of ethnography that would focus on the themes of the books as seen from the point of view of Americans today who are concerned about how we educate our children, how we provide for the full participation of all members of society, and how we plan for the future. Times change, but comparison is always illuminating and always suggests the possibility of choice. Teenage girls in Samoa in the 1920s provided an illuminating comparison with American teenagers of that era, who were still living in the shadow of the Victorian age, and they provide an equally illuminating comparison with girls today, who are under early pressure from demands on their sexuality and their gender. Preteen boys in Manus allow us to examine alternative emphases on physical skills and on imagination in childhood—and do so across fifty years of debate about how to offer our children both. Gender roles that were being challenged when Mead was growing up reverted during the postwar resurgence of domesticity and have once again opened up—but the most important fact to remember about gender is that it is culturally constructed and that human beings can play with the biology of sex in many different ways. So we read these books with their echoes not only of distant climes but also of different moments in American history, in order to learn from the many ways of being human how to make better choices for the future.

# *introduction to the*

## *Perennial edition*

Margaret Mead was short and female. To manage that in a world of science dominated by tall males, she spoke firmly *and* carried a big stick—a long forked staff, set off by the dramatic cape she wore in public. Yet she was so compassionate a field anthropologist that informants named their children after her. Decades before Carl Sagan and other scientists learned to write directly to the public, Mead was writing bestsellers like *Coming of Age in Samoa* and had a regular column in the women's magazine, *Redbook*. That cost her with her peers.

She was sharp, in both senses. She could anticipate the argument of a scientist or political authority and cut it off with a pronouncement. She was queen bee at New York's American Museum of Natural History. She waded effectively and tirelessly into public policy in the mold of an Eleanor Roosevelt, yet as a liberal she was too intellectually honest to be predictable or "reliable." She never claimed feminism nor would feminists claim her, because, again, decades before it became a movement in America, she was advancing the study of child rearing, education, and the role of females and was herself a model of how to shatter the glass

ceiling. She found many of the 1970s feminists to be too narrow-minded and narrow-agendaed for her taste and offered criticism which was as uninvited as it was astute.

In 1976, I spent one day with Margaret Mead, conducting a joint interview with her and her former husband, Gregory Bateson. Her insight and personality were so memorable that I find I still converse regularly with her shade, who is as impatient, amused, and helpful as ever. What a treat, then, to engage the substantial Margaret in this remarkable book.

It is a book about change, about the most difficult kind of transition for humans: cultural change. It explores important questions about how profound systemic change can occur successfully. Mead's island tribe, the Manus, underwent sudden, comprehensive cultural change—something usually thought to be impossible or so destructive as to be not worth attempting. Sudden comprehensive change, in the French Revolution of 1789, the Russian Revolution of 1917, the Chinese Communist Revolution of 1949, led to grotesque failure, yet the self-conversion of the “stone-age” Manus to a “modern” society in a single generation is a success story. What happened?

No one was better positioned to answer that question than Dr. Mead. She had the “before” data: she had studied the Manus in the depth in the late 1920s. Returning in the 1950s, she was talking to the same informants and studying the same families, families who were now living in a new world of their own making. She could document which practices were utterly transformed and which remained constant. She could try to tease out the details of traditional Manus character and behavior that might have allowed an anthropologist to predict the successful transition. Having been part of the founding of the science of cybernetics, she had a depth of understanding of dynamic systems that is still rare half a century later.

Margaret Mead lets you watch her learn. Puzzled by the emptiness of a government-mandated council meeting, she realizes, “While taxation without representation is tyranny. . . . *government without taxation is degradation.*” The Manus are handed

governance instead of being required to invest in it; it becomes something done *to* them instead of *with* them. You can see Mead taking extra glee from insights that go against her own liberal instincts. Her love became a form of tough love, based in matter-of-fact common sense informed by constant inquiry. She lived for surprise, for data that would change her opinions, revise her theories. As a result, her theories have proved more durable than most, and the subjects she took on remain important.

*New Lives for Old* is a book about civilization. For the Manus, civilization is a choice, not a given. Why do they choose it? What elements of civilization are most important to them? What details from the American military and Australian governmental apparatus are seized on? How do those details work when thrown into a wholly different context? I'm thrilled by Manus statements such as, "Before, we couldn't count back, we only knew our fathers and our father's fathers." Calendric time, a fundamental tool of civilization, is a revelation to them; likewise, machines: "The Americans believe in having work done by machines so that men can live to old age instead of dying worn out while they are still young." And the Manus, it turns out, are highly adept at understanding and fixing machines. Mead explains how their traditional harsh seafishing life and child-training techniques made them naturally machine-friendly.

She theorizes that much of the success of the Manus transition can be attributed to its selective use of existing models, as opposed to trying to invent from scratch. Old models made new are refreshing to contemplate. Thus, the familiar idea of equality before the law is stated in a Manus court case: "All of us are human, all of us are weak, you do wrong and come before the court, I also do wrong and if I do, I must come before the court, none of us is without blame, this is the fashion of humankind." That's worth etching on the walls of anybody's Supreme Court. For the Manus it meant the replacement of constant harassment and quarreling as the social norm with a prevalence of laughter and singing around the village.

*New Lives for Old* was published in 1956. While America was

in the midst of a postwar boom, the intelligentsia of the time was critical of everything American—America was deemed shallow in contrast to European depth; it was seen as being in a decline similar to the fall of the Roman Empire. In that environment, Mead's report was unwelcome good news. Its optimism went against the grain. Its implied praise of America was embarrassing. Neither for the first nor last time, she was criticized. Yet, she criticized right back and went on studying how to make things work, from the family to education to civilization.

Margaret Mead's anthropology stood tall, and female. The book wears well. It is welcome back.

—*Stewart Brand*

## *preface to the 1975 edition*

This book is the record of one of the most astonishing and rewarding experiences that has fallen to the lot of man or woman in this century. In 1928 I made a study of the Manus, a small group of primitive people, on a little known archipelago, the Admiralty Islands, in a relatively unknown and very primitive part of the world called the Trust Territory of New Guinea. I finished my research, returned to America, wrote a book about them called *Growing up in New Guinea*, and some technical papers, and then went on to other problems in other places. I never expected to revisit them, nor did I have much hope that I would ever know their fate, although I knew there would be news, no doubt, of the progressive course of the loss of their aboriginal culture, as mission, trader and government moved in. I thought the children with whom I spent so many vivid months would remain forever in my mind as I had known them, two and four and six, bright eyed or sulky, never to be known as grown-up people because I would have no knowledge of their future. For the people of the small village of Peri, in Manus, my husband and I were passing into the realm of the unknown, never to return.

And then through an extraordinary series of circumstances attending World War II, the people of Manus Island moved to the center of international concern. They accomplished a non-

violent transformation of their society which was faster, more complete and more startling than anything recorded before. And in 1952, my Australian anthropologist friends insisted that I go back to study what had happened. I was in a unique and unusual position to do this because, unlike most anthropologists who, attempting to catch the details of a culture on the edge of change, work with the oldest members of a tribe, I had studied young children.

Most anthropologists returning after twenty-five years would have found a village of strangers. I found the small boys I had known so well, entrenched in positions of leadership, crossing the widest distance between cultural levels that had ever been known in human history—from a recent past in the stone age to the electronic age. It is quite possible that no such distance will ever be recorded after this century. Exploration from the industrialized world has become so pervasive and comprehensive that no people on this planet can hide for long within even the deepest jungle fastnesses without some mapping satellite noting the smoke from their fires.

This opportunity then was indeed unique. What I found changed my ideas about the possibilities of rapid and complete cultural change as compared with slow piecemeal change, where each change sets up a compensatory process which becomes in turn a drag on constructive progress. It was not that I believed that every primitive people could change so rapidly and constructively as the Manus had done, but rather that one instance of such rapid change could alter our whole notion of how change occurred. A careful investigation of the process by which a preliterate people with only ceremonial economic ties to bind them together could build themselves a society, and face the exacting modern world, gave us new ideas about the conditions necessary for such changes.

Among the Manus I found three conditions: the fact that they made the changes under their own steam; the sweeping and inclusive character of the changes they made; and the presence of a rarely gifted leader. These all relate to issues which were and still

are agitating people all over the world: how much should change spring from the people themselves; how much can or should it be helped from outside? How many things have to be changed at once if any change is going to stick? And do we need leadership, charismatic leadership, for the people of a nation-state, or even the people of the smallest village, to change their way of life?

The new light that this return to Manus shed on these problems in 1955 is just as relevant in 1975. All over the world there are experiments in centralization and experiments in decentralization, from introducing nationwide programs of population control in Eastern Europe to the attempts to establish self-sufficient communes in the People's Republic of China, from tractor factories in one country making tractors for the world to attempts to develop middle technologies—little technologies using local materials. The question of how much dependence should be placed on local initiative bedevils the technical assistance planning of governments all over the world, from the poverty programs in the United States in the 1960s to the efforts of industrial missions, special cadres of highly trained workers, Peace Corps, International Volunteer corps, trained in one country and sent to inspire and implement the aspirations of the rural people of another.

Perhaps the most vexed question of all is the question of leadership. How essential is a leader? Is the present plight of the world—as the leaders, remnants of World War II, die off and are replaced by men who don't have their predecessors' apparent capacity to command a following—due to our having constructed political conditions which jeopardize rather than promote personal leadership? In Africa old patterns of rivalry among the sons of chiefs reassert themselves in rivalry among nominally elected leaders. In the Middle East, Asian styles of resolving succession survive. In the Euro-American world, assassination and kidnapping are new threats to those who accept the leadership role. How much does the actual personality of the leader matter and how much depends on surrounding conditions? Has TV made it harder for any human being to achieve and retain



charisma? Can a team approach, more appropriate to the complexities of the modern, overspecialized and interdependent world, really work? These are all live questions today, as they were live questions in 1953 when this study was made and when this book was first published in 1955.

What the anthropologist is able to do is to bring the understanding of a microcosm, a small native village, to bear on the macrocosmic problems of a larger nation, or today, a globally interdependent community of peoples. Because this restudy of Manus was made with a lively appreciation of what our worldwide problems were going to be, it still presents matter for thought and analysis.

Furthermore, what concerned me then and concerns me now—the ability of Americans to provide an infusion of vital belief in the importance of human well-being into international contacts—is even more pressing today. One example of the possibilities of this contact was demonstrated by the way the people of Manus understood our institutions, fastened on our ideals and neglected many of our most conspicuous defects. They interpreted the tremendous effort put into the care of each individual serviceman in the American Armed Forces during World War II as primarily a demonstration of how important Americans thought each human life to be—not as a cold-blooded calculation of how much it would cost to train a substitute for an unrehabilitated serviceman. Both were true, but they saw the emphasis on human beings as paramount. They interpreted American GIs' willingness to give Uncle Sam's property away to them as generosity, which it was, because the Americans enjoyed the Manus and were glad to give them tools. They were in fact a kind of living tribute to how much good could be extracted from the basic ideals of American culture. They saw that all servicemen—black as well as white—wore the same clothes, ate the same food and drew the same pay—an enormous guarantee that they who had been treated as incapable of movement into the modern world could in fact do anything the white man could do. And they proceeded to try—with great success.