George Peter Murdock (1897–1985)

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George Peter Murdock died peacefully on the 29th of March, 1985, at age 87. He is survived by his son, Bob, and three grandchildren. His wife, Carmen, died in 1981.

Called “Pete” by his family and friends, he was born in 1897 on a farm near Meriden, Connecticut. In an autobiographical sketch (Murdock 1965) he tells us that he was named after “Peter Murdock, a Scotsman who migrated as a youth to the American colonies in the 1690’s” (p. 351). For five generations the Murdock lineage maintained successful farms in the Westbrook area of Connecticut. Murdock’s grandfather, Zina, temporarily broke the line of farmers and ran a flatboat carrying goods down the Ohio and Mississippi rivers. He eventually returned to Connecticut and bought the farm on which Pete was born and brought up.

Although many members of the Murdock lineage were college graduates— all of them attending Yale— Pete’s father, George, attended an academy in New Haven where he studied Latin and Greek but did not continue on to college. To quote again from his autobiographical sketch, “Perhaps the strongest influence my father exerted on me derived from the fact that he was born and reared before the Civil War and thus acquired early in life the political philosophy of Thomas Jefferson, with an especially strong commitment to civil liberties and the Bill of Rights. He remained a democrat all his life” (p. 352).

Though his mother sang in the choir of the Congregational church and the family attended Sunday services, his father, being an agnostic and against organized religion, did not join the church and was upset when Pete briefly joined because he played tennis with the minister.

Pete’s primary education was begun in a one room schoolhouse a half mile from his house and completed in Meriden. He attended high school in Meriden for three years, and then, to prepare himself for entry to Yale, he finished his secondary school education at Phillips Academy at Andover. He received his A.B. degree from Yale in 1919, majoring in American history.

During his adolescent years he spent his vacations working on his father’s farm. To quote again from his autobiography, he “became familiar with horses and oxen, which were used for the heavier draft purposes; with the care of cows, pigs and poultry; with the cultivation of rye, oats, corn, potatoes, fruits, and garden vegetables; with the operation of farm machinery as well as of such primitive artifacts as flails, scythes, cradles, and stone boats; with the harvesting of ice, the cutting of cordwood, and the use of carpenters’ tools” (p. 356).

Pete was proud of his firsthand knowledge of diversified farming techniques. He believed that his graduate students should be familiar with such knowledge if they intended to do fieldwork in a preindustrial society that practiced farming or animal husbandry. Consequently, he used to quiz us and made fun of those who thought that a stone boat was used for fishing or water transport rather than a heavy wooden sled drawn by oxen, that was used for hauling boulders, particularly when
making stone walls. Since I was brought up on a similar, diversified New England farm, which also had oxen and stone boats, I was able to pass this informal oral examination.

After graduating from Yale, Pete attended the Harvard Law School, but in the beginning of his second year he decided he did not want to be a lawyer, quit, and took a trip around the world. This trip, combined with the courses he had taken from A. G. Keller as an undergraduate at Yale, persuaded him that he wanted to be an anthropologist. "Upon my return to the United States in 1922, I first interviewed Franz Boas. When he heard my story, he flatly refused to admit me to graduate study at Columbia University. I was, he told me, nothing but a dilettante, and he wanted nothing to do with any applicant not already full dedicated" (Murdock 1965:358). After considering Harvard and rejecting it, he applied to the Yale department and was accepted. He received his Ph.D. in 1925 in the joint anthropology-sociology program at Yale.

Since he had applied to Columbia, Pete was well aware of the importance of historical particularism. But at Yale, he was thoroughly exposed to the evolutionary approach to anthropology. The chairman of the Yale department and Murdock's thesis advisor was A. G. Keller. At that time, Keller was completing the monumental "The Science of Society" (1927)—the culmination of his collaboration with William Graham Sumner, the leading American social evolutionist. Pete's Ph.D. thesis (Murdock 1931) was a translation and evaluation of the two-volume work, "The Evolution of Culture," by Julius Lippert, a German evolutionist. Pete's first teaching position was at the University of Maryland. Two years later, he was appointed as an assistant professor in Keller's department at Yale.

The evolutionist approach had been under strong attack on both sides of the Atlantic since the turn of the century. One of the strongest and most vociferous critics was Franz Boas. Yale's response to this conflict was to define social evolutionists as sociologists and reserve the "anthropologist" label for members of the historical school. When Edward Sapir was brought to Yale in 1932, he was made chairman of a new department of anthropology rather than being given an appointment in Keller's sociology department. Murdock was given a joint appointment in both departments and became the chairman of the anthropology department in 1938.

In 1932 "The Science of Culture," Pete's first published paper, appeared in American Anthropologist. In this paper he argued that anthropology is an empirical science and that an imposing body of ethnographic data had been collected and not yet properly analyzed. He also argued that human behavior was learned rather than instinctive and that therefore "culture" was a more appropriate term than "society" to refer to the subject matter of anthropology. He argued that it is misleading to assume that insect societies based on instinct are comparable to human societies based on habits.

Taking seriously the criticism that social evolutionists were "armchair philosophers" who never did fieldwork, Pete carried out a field study of the Haida of the Northwest Coast in the summer of 1932, and the Tenino of Oregon in the summers of 1934 and 1935. He took me with him as a graduate student apprentice on one of these trips. It was a very valuable part of my training.

At the same time he affirmed his loyalty to his teachers by editing a festschrift for A. G. Keller entitled Studies in the Science of Society (Murdock 1937b). In this he published his first cross-cultural paper, "Correlations of Matrilineal and Patrilineal Institutions." In this paper he argued that a science of society or culture must be based on a worldwide sample of "cases" and that these cases must be identified, shown to be reasonably independent, the variables defined, and any association assumed to exist between variables tested by cross-tabulation. He thus initiated the Murdocksian cross-cultural approach to ethnology. This was quite different from the speculative unilineal stage theories of the early evolutionists or the particularistic approach of the historical school.

A very important influence on the development of Pete's theoretical position resulted from his participation in the "Monday Night Group" at the Institute of Human Relations. The Institute, a building but not a single department, had been established at Yale in the late 1920s to implement the integration of the human sciences and had brought together such men as Clark Wissler and Edward Sapir as well as psychologists Robert Yerkes, Arnold Gesell, and Clark Hull. In 1935 some of the younger members of the staff, who felt that most of the older established figures were just continuing to do their own thing, decided to take the charter of the Institute seriously and set about to examine the basic assumptions of the social sciences. Due in large measure to the instigation of John Dollard, the Monday Night Group was formed. At weekly meetings the basic tenets and methods of each of the social science disciplines represented were discussed and exemplified. Pete was asked to represent anthropology in this group and was an
active member of the Institute staff until World War II. He says of this experience, "Constant interaction with such men as John Dollard, Leonard Doob, Clark Hull, Bronislaw Malinowski, Mark May, Neal Miller, Robert Sears, John Whiting, and Earl Zinn created an intellectual environment of mutual stimulation and osmosis unparalleled at any other period of my life. As a result, I came to regard myself first and foremost a behavioral scientist, though with a specialty in anthropology. In this respect I have felt a special sense of kinship with other anthropologists, notably John Gillin, A. I. Hallowell, and Clyde Kluckhohn, who shared in part the same experience" (Murdoch 1965).

In his role as a representative of anthropology at the Institute, Pete felt he should provide his fellow behavioral scientists with a viable data base to test the cross-cultural validity of their hypotheses. Under the auspices of the Institute of Human Relations and physically located in its building, Pete founded the "Cross-Cultural Survey" to assemble and classify "the basic information on a sample of the peoples of the earth. Its ultimate objective was to organize in readily accessible form the available data on a statistically representative sample of all known cultures—primitive, historical, and contemporary—for the purpose of testing cross-cultural generalizations, revealing deficiencies in the descriptive literature, and directing corrective fieldwork" (Murdoch et al. 1982[1938]:xxi).

To achieve this objective, Murdoch and a small staff of anthropologists constructed an "Outline of Cultural Materials," which was to serve as an index for classifying ethnographic materials. A first edition was published in 1938 (Murdoch et al. 1982[1938]). This edition was circulated among a number of anthropologists and social scientists in allied fields and used to classify the published ethnographic materials on 90 cultures. On the basis of the suggestions received and reports by the staff on a pretest, a revised edition of the outline was prepared in 1942 and published in 1945. It is now in its fifth edition.

There was some discussion at the beginning as to whether the ethnographic materials should be abstracted or reproduced verbatim. Pete adamantly favored the verbatim choice. This meant that each source had to be reproduced, indexed, and filed. He therefore assembled a staff of indexers and typists—this was before Xerox—and by 1943 nearly 150 cultures had been processed.

During World War II Pete felt that the cross-cultural survey might be useful to the war effort and decided to focus the efforts of the staff on the islands of the Pacific. He also enlisted in the navy and persuaded Joe (Clellan S.) Ford and me to enlist at the same time. He had arranged that the three of us be assigned to a naval unit at Columbia University under orders to produce handbooks that would be useful for military government when and if we should occupy the islands. Micronesia was our assignment. Pete arranged for the reports of the 1910 German expedition to be translated and processed for the files at Yale and also for the available Japanese sources to be translated. With these sources supplementing the sources written in English, we were able to produce a set of Civil Affairs Handbooks describing the cultures of the islands of Micronesia from Bikini to Yap as well as Okinawa and Taiwan. After we had completed these handbooks we were sent to the Pacific as military government officers and were on active duty in Okinawa from its invasion until the end of the war. Pete attained the rank of commander.

At the end of the war, Pete continued his interest in the Pacific. He was largely responsible for organizing anthropological fieldwork in the area, particularly Micronesia. Writing the handbooks had made it clear that the ethnography of the area should be brought up to date. He organized a field research program funded by the Office of Naval Research and sponsored by the Pacific Science Board of the National Research Council. Under this program 33 anthropologists and linguists went to Micronesia. Pete took advantage of this program to do more fieldwork and in 1947 he led a team to Truk where he collaborated with Ward Goodenough in carrying out a study of the social organization of the people there (see Murdoch and Goodenough 1947). Pete continued to be involved in sponsoring research on the islands of the Pacific for the next 20 years.

In 1948, Pete became convinced that the cross-cultural files would be more useful if copies were distributed among universities in addition to Yale. He therefore approached the Social Science Research Council, who considered and approved a proposal to carry out this aim. As a consequence, an interuniversity organization called the Human Relations Area Files, Inc. (HRAF) was formed in 1949. Although Pete remained a member of the Board until his retirement, he turned over the active administration of HRAF to Joe (C. S.) Ford.

He continued to contribute to the files, however, by making available the vast knowledge of the peoples of the world that he had accumulated over the years. When I was a graduate student at Yale in the 1930s, Pete would
spend nearly every weekday night from 8:00 p.m. to 5:00 a.m. in the Yale library examining every possible source of ethnographic information, identifying the group described and listing all references. As a consequence he was able to publish a listing of all known cultures of the world—The Outline of World Cultures (Murdock 1975 [1954]). This served as an approximation of the universe of known peoples of the world, which was necessary if the aim of the files was to produce a representative sample of this universe.

In the late 1950s he was persuaded by some of his colleagues to publish the materials that he had coded in order to make statistical tests of various propositions about how cultural variables are related to one another. He began with the “World Ethnographic Sample” (1957), which consisted of 365 cultures coded on 30 cultural characteristics. In 1960 he moved from Yale to the University of Pittsburgh to become the Andrew Mellon Professor of Anthropology, a position he held until his retirement in 1973 at the age of 75. There, during the years 1962–67, he prepared and published installments of the Ethnographic Atlas which appeared in issues of Ethnology. In the atlas, the number of coded variables (cultural characteristics) was increased to over 100 and the number of cultures to nearly 1,200. When the Ethnographic Atlas was completed, he collaborated with Douglas White to define a “Standard Cross Cultural Sample” (1969) of 186 cultures carefully selected to represent the ethnographic universe. He then proceeded to update and expand his codes and make them available to others: “Subsistence Economy and Supportive Practices” (Murdock and Morrow 1970), “Settlement Patterns and Community Organization” (Murdock and Wilson 1972), “Measurement of Cultural Complexity” (Murdock and Provost 1973), and “World Distribution of Theories of Illness” (Murdock, Wilson, and Frederick 1978).

By the middle of the 1960s the cross-cultural approach had gained a substantial number of practitioners, not only in anthropology but in allied social science fields, particularly psychology and human development. Under Pete’s leadership, the Society for Cross-Cultural Research was formed. Pete insisted that the society be interdisciplinary and therefore in its charter the chairmanship cannot be held for two years in a row by a representative of any one discipline and the board consists of an anthropologist, a psychologist, and another social scientist. The association has been strong and active since its formation and, in my opinion, has provided an exciting forum for the free exchange of ideas.

As suggested above, Pete’s substantive interests were varied, but they were focused on the field of kinship and social organization. Beginning in 1934, he wrote numerous papers on these subjects: “Kinship and Social Behavior among the Haida” (1934), “Correlations of Matrilineal and Patrilineal Institutions” (1937a), “Double Descent” (1940), “Bifurcate Merging: A Test of Five Theories” (1947), “The Social Regulation of Sexual Behavior” (1949), and “Murngin Social Organization” (with William E. Lawrence, 1947). This interest culminated in the publication of Social Structure ([1965]1949). Using a world sample of 250 societies, he put most of the then current theories to statistical test and demonstrated that some were supported and some were not. The most important contribution, however, was his application of the integrated behavior science theory developed at the Institute of Human Relations. Integrating hypotheses derived from psychoanalysis, learning theory, and the concept of culture, he was able to show that exogamous rules could be explained as derivatives of the incest taboo within categories defined by the kinship system.

After completing Social Structure, Pete began work on his second major publication—Africa: Its Peoples and Their Culture History (1959). In order to write this book he made a thorough search of the ethnographic and historical literature on Africa and made abstracts of the essential cultural features of each of the more than 350 societies he had identified. He was able to present a convincing picture of the history of migrations of the peoples of Africa by combining the cultural materials with evidence on the origin of cultigens used in various regions, archeological evidence, and the accounts of early travelers. To me it was a much more exciting book than Social Structure. Africanists, however, gave it critical reviews when it first came out. Recent accounts of the history of sub-Saharan Africa accept most of Murdock’s historical interpretations, although he was often not been given explicit credit for them.

So far I have left out what Pete was like as a person. His social life was largely restricted to his graduate students. As mentioned above, he spent many evenings in the library. However, he and Carmen gave frequent dinner parties for graduate students, usually inviting two or three at a time. He also arranged to play bridge or poker with students. Whenever an outside speaker came to talk at the Yale Anthropology Club, the group would be in-
vited after the speech to a beer and singing fest at a nearby restaurant. Pete could be counted on to attend these and, although he couldn't carry a tune, would join heartily in the singing.

Pete set very high standards for his students, particularly those to whom he was closest. He made Joe Ford take his German exam over 20 times before he passed him. When I got the first draft of my Ph.D. thesis back from Pete, who was my thesis advisor, the first page was covered with red pencil copyediting and at the top was written: "This is excruciatingly badly written!!!" As I remember, Pete treated Ward Goodenough's thesis in a similar manner. Once they had met his standards, however, Pete was unusually supportive of his students. He kept track of their activities and writings. Perhaps most important, he would listen seriously to their ideas and opinions, and sometimes he even took their advice.

Pete left behind him not only a son and three grandchildren, but also a large academic kindred who are linked to him by the belief that anthropology could and should make a major contribution to the science of human cognitive and social behavior and that all hypotheses about human behavior should be tested across an appropriate sample of all known cultures.

Note: for additional material on Murdock's life, see the excellent biographical essay by Ward Goodenough which appeared in the International Encyclopedia for the Social Sciences (1979), including a complete bibliography of Murdock's works.

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