

Ralph Linton 1893-1953

[originally published in *American Anthropologist*, 56:274-280, 1954]

JOHN GILLIN

University of North Carolina

Death came to Ralph Linton, Sterling Professor of Anthropology at Yale University, on Christmas Eve, 1953, in his sixty-first year, as the result of the final one of a series of heart attacks that had afflicted him over a period of some eight years. At the time of his death he was one of the two or three most distinguished anthropologists in the world, and there is every reason to believe that the verdict of history will preserve his eminence in the annals of our science. As one who enjoyed his personal friendship for twenty-five years, I cannot but find extremely painful the present task of recording his untimely passing.

Linton had received practically all of the honors that can be bestowed upon an anthropologist. In 1946, the year he became Sterling Professor at Yale, he was president of the American Anthropological Association, and in 1951 he was Viking Fund Medalist for general anthropology. He had been designated to receive in 1954 the Huxley Medal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, the second American ever to receive this award. At various times he was a member of the National Research Council, the Social Science Research Council, and the American Council of Learned Societies. He was a member of the National Academy of Sciences and served as chairman of its Division of Anthropology from 1948-1950. In 1937 he was vice president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. From 1938 to 1945 inclusive he was chairman of the Department of Anthropology at Columbia University, succeeding Franz Boas in that post. In November 1953, as the second Doctor of Philosophy ever chosen for this honor, he delivered the Thomas William Salmon Lectures to the American Medical Association on the subject of "Culture and Mental Disorders." His name and works are household words in the human disciplines and there are few textbooks or general treatises in the sciences of human behavior that do not make reference to his writings. Thus, although Linton's life was all too short, it was crowned by the most solid achievement.

Ralph Linton was born on February 27, 1893 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, into an old

Quaker family. His father was a business man and the home environment was that of the average liberal Hicksite Quaker. Although books and periodicals were present in the home, there was little overt scientific or intellectual interest. His father was, according to his own account, "a stern parent of the old style" who believed that growing boys should spend their spare time in a strict schedule of chores about the home place and should earn their own spending money. From the age of ten, the younger Linton's vacations were spent working in one or other of a chain of restaurants owned by his father in Philadelphia. Perhaps as a result of this early training, Ralph Linton throughout his life showed an uncommon respect for punctuality, fulfilment of obligation, and the value of money. Yet, once funds had been acquired through the practice of such homely Quaker virtues, Ralph Linton's generosity was phenomenal.

Linton was sent to the Moorestown Friends High School where, he said, he found little inspiration to study. But, upon entering Swarthmore College, he came under the influence of Dr. Spencer Trotter, at that time teaching courses in general science, who inspired him with the notion of seeking means for the synthesis of diverse points of view.

Entering anthropology as an archeologist while still an undergraduate, he joined a field expedition to New Mexico and southern Colorado in the summer of 1912, and in the following winter assisted in excavations and making casts of Maya monuments at Quiriguá, Guatemala. In 1915 he received his B.A. from Swarthmore and the following year obtained an M.A. in anthropology from the University of Pennsylvania. In the summer of 1915 he took part in excavations near Haddenfield, New Jersey, where he discovered an Archaic site, the first instance of this culture identified south of New England. The summer of 1916, following his year at Pennsylvania, was spent in excavations at Aztec, New Mexico, under the auspices of the American Museum of Natural History. The winter of 1916-1917 he studied at Columbia University, where he came to know Franz Boas. The period 1917-1919 saw him serving in Battery D, 149th Field Artillery, 42nd

{Rainbow) Division, with the rank of corporal. During a period at the front in France he was mildly gassed. The military experience seems to have made an unusually strong and positive impression on Linton, as a Quaker youth reared in a tradition opposed to the bearing of arms, and resulted in one of his earliest publications in social anthropology, "Totemism and the A.E.F." (AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGIST 26: 294-300).

Following demobilization he returned to anthropology and went to Mesa Verde National Park where he assisted in the excavation and reconstruction of Square Tower House. While on this expedition he discovered an excavated Earth Lodge A, the first Basket Maker III structure to be identified in that region. During the winter of 1919-1920 he pursued graduate studies at Harvard University from which institution he received the Ph.D. degree in 1925. However, after a year's academic work at Harvard, he was sent (1920-1922) to the Marquesas Islands by the B. P. Bishop Museum of Honolulu, Hawaii. Although dispatched as an archeologist, Linton found the living Marquesans more interesting than the archeological remains of their ancestors. The trip was a turning point in his career, and from that time forward his attention was directed primarily to living people and their cultures. Although he never "turned his back" on archeology or material culture, they were increasingly overshadowed by his consuming interest in social structure, cultural process, and personality.

Upon return from the Marquesas (1922) Linton obtained appointment as Assistant Curator in charge of North American Indian collections at what was then called the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago. In the summer of 1924 he took part in the excavation of the original Hopewell site in Ohio. In 1925 he was sent to Madagascar as a one-man Captain Marshall Field Madagascar Expedition. He spent the next two and one-half years on the island, and crossed over to Portuguese East Africa, Mashonaland, and Rhodesia. Apart from a series of important scientific papers, his experiences were recorded in a series of articles published by the *Atlantic Monthly*.

After some sixteen years (starting in undergraduate days) as a field and museum anthropologist, Linton entered academic life in 1928, with his appointment as Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Wisconsin. The following year he was promoted to full professor. While at Wisconsin he spent several summers in archeological field work, in

cooperation with the Milwaukee Public Museum, in the northern part of the state. In the summer of 1934 he was in charge of the Laboratory of Anthropology's training expedition to the Comanche Indians of Oklahoma.

From the first Linton proved to be a magnificent lecturer and teacher, with an unusual ability to interest casual students (of whom the present writer was one) in careers in professional anthropology. Teaching at Wisconsin stimulated his developing theoretical interests and resulted in 1936 in the publication of the book, *The Study of Man, An Introduction*, which to the day of his death he regarded as his magnum opus. This book was a milestone in anthropology, for it provided a bridging theory which enabled the previously differing theoretical factions of anthropology to reach some modicum of agreement and common orientation.

In 1937 Linton went to Columbia University and was made chairman of the Department of Anthropology in 1938. Contact with psychologists there stimulated his interest in the field of personality and culture and led to the establishment of a series of joint seminars with Dr. Abram Kardiner, which resulted in the publication of two volumes (in collaboration with Kardiner), *The Individual and his Society* and *The Psychological Frontiers of Society*, and, in 1945, his own book (an expression of views increasingly divergent from those of Kardiner), *The Cultural Background of Personality*. While at Columbia he assisted in the installation of a South Sea art exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art that resulted in a volume, *Art of the South Seas*.

In 1946 Linton was invited to Yale to occupy the chair of Sterling Professor of Anthropology, the post he held until his death.

In reviewing his positive qualities, mention should be made of the following. Ralph Linton possessed an unusual quality (among anthropologists, at least) of being able to express his ideas in pure and simple English. "Everyone" could understand what he was saying. His English style was, for the most part, impeccable. Thus Ralph Linton was able to "reach" persons otherwise uncontactable. But, with all that, he also had "something to say."

Linton's greatest fortes consisted in his ability to synthesize current ideas and thereby to originate new ones. He could see, usually with unerring precision, the "common denominator" in the widest variety of propositions having to do with culture. And, more than that, being a man of broad interests, he could with almost uncanny

intuition put his finger on the viable contributions of adjacent disciplines for the benefit of cultural theory.

Endowed with what is sometimes called a “photographic memory” – which he always modestly deprecated as a “freak gift of nature” for which he himself deserved no credit – he was able, apparently without effort, to command vast bodies of esoteric data to the envy of his less fortunate colleagues. For example, it was commonly held in the profession that “Linton never forgot a specimen.” As a result of his long experience in museums and in the field he could “place” with accuracy almost any artifact that was presented to him. Likewise, he sometimes loved to astound his friends by quoting verbatim whole pages from books – not only in anthropology, but also in general literature – whose very titles they had often forgotten. Yet he never used this ability for purposes of “bluff”; he would readily admit his ignorance of a published work, an artifact, or an area if, in fact, he was not acquainted with it.

He had little use for the mechanics of pedantry, which claims so much of the effort of the scholarly profession. His most influential book, *The Study of Man*, contained only one footnote, and that incompletely cited. None of his major works was equipped with a scholarly apparatus of references or extensive bibliography. This disinclination to provide documentary references, combined with an amazing ability to synthesize current ideas into something new, to inject totally novel notions of his own devising, and to state all this in limpidly clear English, led to grateful understanding by his lay and interdisciplinary audiences. Despite his reluctance to put his references down on paper, it was rarely that Linton could be “caught off base” with respect to his facts. There can be little doubt that much of his appeal, both to the academic world and to the general public, lay in his talent of at one and the same time commanding the facts authoritatively and stating them, with a novel twist of his own, in terms that all could understand. Most of his writings, like his conversation and public speeches, were illuminated by flashes of dry humor.

In the strictly academic world the same qualities were evident. He was a phenomenally successful lecturer to elementary classes, and although his lectures were delivered extempore and with an appearance of spontaneity they were prepared with the greatest of care. Likewise, plans for research were elaborated to the final

detail before they were suggested to students or to foundations that might back them.

As a man, Linton was a complicated personality. He had an extraordinary capacity for friendship. He was a man of no “side,” and he made friends not only with his anthropological colleagues but also with men of many different specialties, with his students, and with his informants in the field. With all he was devoid of pretense. He was a man who needed personal relationships, and many of his friends thought that he wasted himself in his constant wanderings about this country and abroad to contact them and to make new acquaintances. Not the least of his charm lay in his informal, man-to-man approach. Anyone who came to know Linton felt that they knew exactly where he “stood.” In honestly stating his opinions he somehow gave the impression that he was taking his listener into his confidence. He exhibited a form of gallantry that made him attractive to women, many of whom lacked the faintest idea of what he was talking about. And as a *raconteur* he was supreme. I have heard him match stories with the best and Linton was always able to “cap” most that was offered.

Yet Linton was capable of intense personal dislikes, which, from an objective point of view, usually seemed to be quite irrational. A deep study of his personality would be required to explain this facet of his character. In a contribution to “Twentieth Century Authors,” written three days before his death, Linton sums up his basic philosophy of interpersonal relations. He wrote: “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 *ombiasy nkazo* (medicine man) in Madagascar, and was even invited to join the Rotary Club of a middle western city.”

At the time of his death Linton had completed all but two chapters of his large book, *The Tree of Culture*, on which he had been at work during the previous six years. From his complete notes and outlines for the unwritten chapters Mrs. Linton, with the help of his colleagues at Yale, is completing the book.

In addition to his widow, the former Adelin Sumner Briggs of Madison, Wisconsin, with whom he jointly authored a series of books for the general public, he is survived also by a son of a former marriage.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1917 with B. W. Hawkes. "A Pre-Lenape Site in New Jersey." *Anthropological Publications of the Museum of the University of Pennsylvania* 4, No.3.
- 1917 Reply to "Review of 'A pre-Lenape site in New Jersey'." *American Anthropologist* 19, No. 1: 144-47.
- 1922 The thunder ceremony of the Pawnee. *Field Museum Leaflet* 5, 19 pp. 4 pls.
- 1922 The sacrifice to the morning star by the Skidi Pawnee. *Field Museum Leaflet* 6, 18 pp. 1 pl.
- 1923 Purification of the sacred bundles, a ceremony of the Pawnee. *Field Museum Leaflet* 7, 11 pp., 1 pl.
- 1923 Annual ceremony of the Pawnee medicine men. *Field Museum Leaflet* 8, 20 pp., 2 pls.
- 1923 The material culture of the Marquesas Islands. B. P. Bishop Museum, *Memoirs*, Vol. 8, No.5, pp. 263-471, pls. XL-LXXIV. Honolulu.
- 1924 "Origin of the Plains earth lodge." *American Anthropologist* 26, No.2: 247-57.
- 1924 "Totemism and the A.E.F." *American Anthropologist* 26, No.2: 296-300.
- 1924 "Significance of certain traits in North American maize culture." *American Anthropologist* 26, No.3: 345-49.
- 1924 Use of tobacco among North American Indians. *Field Museum Leaflet* 15, 27 pp., 6 pls.
- 1925 Archaeology of the Marquesas Islands. B. P. Bishop Museum *Bulletin* 23. 187 pp., 30 figs., 15 pls. Honolulu.
- 1925 "Marquesan culture." *American Anthropologist* 27, No.3: 474-78.
- 1926 "Degeneration of human figures used in Polynesian decorative art." *Journal of the Polynesian Society* 33, No.4: 321-24.
- 1926 Ethnology of Polynesia and Micronesia. *Field Museum of Natural History*, Dept. of Anthropology Guide, PL 6. Chicago.
- 1926 "Origin of the Skidi Pawnee sacrifice to the morning star." *American Anthropologist* 28, No. 3: 457-66.
- 1927 "Witches of Andilamena." *Atlantic Monthly* 139: 191-96 (February).
- 1927 "Overland." *Atlantic Monthly* 140: 808-17 (December).
- 1927 "Report on work of Field Museum expedition in Madagascar." *American Anthropologist* 29, No. 3: 292-307.
- 1927 "Rice, a Malagasy tradition." *American Anthropologist* 29, No.4: 654-60.
- 1928 "Culture areas in Madagascar." *American Anthropologist* 30: 363-90.
- 1928 "White magic." *Atlantic Monthly* 141: 721-35 (June).
- 1928 "Desert." *Atlantic Monthly* 142: 588-600 (November).
- 1928 "Market day in Madagascar." *Asia* 28, No.5: 386-89.
- 1930 "Use of tobacco in Madagascar" *in Tobacco and its Use in Africa* by B. Laufer, W. D. Hambly, and Ralph Linton. *Field Museum Leaflet* 29, pp. 38-43. Chicago.
- 1933 "Primitive art." *The American Magazine of Art* 26, No.1: 17-24, 4 pls. Washington, American Federation of Arts.
- 1933 The Tanala, a hill tribe of Madagascar. *Field Museum of Natural History, Anthropological Series* 22. 334 pp., 35 figs. Chicago.
- 1935 "The Comanche sun dance." *American Anthropologist* 37, No.3: 420-28.
- 1936 With R. Redfield, and M. J. Herskovits. "Memorandum for the study of acculturation." *American Anthropologist* 38, No.1: 149--52.
- 1936 "Error in anthropology" *in The Story of Human Error*, pp. 292-321. New York. Appleton-Century.
- 1936 The study of man, an introduction. New York, Appleton-Century.
- 1937 "On theory and practice." *University of Toronto Quarterly* 7: 113-25.
- 1931 "One hundred per cent American." *American Mercury* 40: 427-29 (April).
- 1938 "Culture, society and the individual." *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*. No.4: 425-36.
- 1938 "The present status of anthropology." *Science* 87: 241-48.
- 1938 "One hundred per cent American." *Readers Digest* 32, No.191 : 31-33.
- 1939 "Culture sequences in Madagascar ." *Transactions of the New York Academy of No.7: 116-17.*
- 1939 "The effects of culture on mental and emotional processes." *Research Publications of the Assoc. for Research in Nervous and Mental Disease*, pp. 293-301.
- 1939 Foreword, pp. v-xviii; "Marquesan culture," pp. 197-250; "The Tanala of Madagascar," pp. 251-90; *in The Individual and His Society*, by Abram Kardiner. New York, Columbia University Press.
- 1940 (Ed.) *Acculturation in seven American Indian tribes*. New York, Appleton-Century.
- 1940 "Crops, soils, and culture in America" *in The Maya and their Neighbors*, pp. 32-40. New York, Appleton-Century.
- 1940 "Psychology and anthropology." *Journal of Social Philosophy* 5, No.2: 115-26.
- 1940 "A neglected aspect of social organization." *American Journal of Sociology* 45, No.6: 870-86.
- 1940 "The prospects of Western civilization" *in War in the Twentieth Century*. (W. W. Waller, ed.), pp. 533-56. New York, Dryden Press.
- 1941 "Primitive art." *Kenyon Review* 3, No.1: 34-51, 4 pls. Gambier, Ohio.
- 1941 "Some functional, social and biological aspects of offenses and offenders." *Federal Probation* 5, No.2: 17-21.
- 1941 "Some recent developments in Southwestern archaeology." *Transactions of the New York Academy of Sciences* 4, No.2: 66-69.
- 1942 "Age and sex categories." *American Sociological Review* 7, No.5: 589-603.
- 1942 "Land tenure in aboriginal America," *in The Changing Indian*, pp. 42-54. Norman, University of Oklahoma Press.
- 1942 *Estudio del Hombre* (trans. by Daniel F. Rubín de la Borbolla). Mexico City, Fondo de Cultura Economica.
- 1943 "Culture sequences in Madagascar." *Studies in the Anthropology of Oceania and Asia*, in memory of Roland Barrage [sic] Dixon, pp. 72-80. Cambridge, Peabody Museum.

- 1943 "Nativistic movements." *American Anthropologist* 45, No.2: 230-40.
- 1943 O Homem: Uma Introdução a Antropologia (trans. by Lavinia Vilela). Sao Paulo, Livraria, Martins Editora.
- 1944 "North American cooking pots." *American Antiquity* 9, No.4: 369-80.
- 1944 "Nomad raids and fortified pueblos." *American Antiquity* 10, No.1: 28-32.
- 1944 With Adelin Linton. "Say, how'd you like the girls?" *McCall's Magazine*, pp.14 (August).
- 1945 The cultural background of personality. New York, Appleton-Century.
- 1945 Foreword to a Chinese Village by Martin C. Yang, pp. vii. New York, Columbia University Press.
- 1945 Cultura y Personalidad (trans. by Javier Romero). Mexico, D.F., Fondo de Cultura Economica.
- 1945 Foreword, pp. v-xiii; "The Comanche," pp. 47-80; in *The Psychological Frontiers of Society*, by Abram Kardiner. Columbia University Press.
- 1945 (Ed.) *The science of man in the world crisis*. New York, Columbia University Press.
- 1945 "The scope and aims of anthropology," pp. 3-18; "Present world conditions in cultural perspective," pp. 201-21; in *The Science of Man in the World Crisis*. New York, Columbia University Press.
- 1946 Introduction to *Journey to Accompong* by Katherine Dunham. New York, Henry Holt.
- 1946 With Paul Wingert and Rene d'Harnoncourt. *Arts of the South Seas*. New York, Museum of Modern Art.
- 1946 "Why you like what you like." *House Beautiful*, p. 154 (December).
- 1947 "The vanishing American Negro." *American Mercury*, pp. 133-139 (January). Reprinted in *Negro Digest*, pp. 33-39 (August).
- 1947 With Adelin Linton. *Man's way from cave to skyscraper*. New York, Harper & Bros.
- 1947 With Abram Kardiner. "The change from dry to wet rice culture in Tanala-Betsileo" in *Readings in Social Psychology*, pp. 46-55. New York, Henry Holt.
- 1947 "Concepts of role and status" in *Readings in Social Psychology*, pp. 330-67.
- 1949 (Ed.) *Most of the world: the peoples of Africa, Latin America and the East today*. New York, Columbia University Press.
- 1949 "Problems of status personality" in *Culture and Personality* (S. S. Sargent and M. W. Smith, eds.). New York, Viking Fund Publication.
- 1949 "The natural history of the family" in *The Family, Its Function and Destiny* (Ruth Nanda Anshen, ed.), pp. 18-38. New York, Harper and Bros.
- 1949 "The personality of peoples." *Scientific American*, pp. 11-15 (August).
- 1949 With Adelin Linton. *We gather together, the story of Thanksgiving*. New York, Henry Schuman.
- 1950 "An anthropologist views Point IV." *American Perspective*, pp. 113-21 (Spring). Washington, D. C., Foundation for Foreign Affairs.
- 1950 "An anthropologist views the Kinsey report." *Scientific Monthly*, pp. 282-85 (May).
- 1950 With Adelin Linton. *Halloween*. New York, Henry Schuman.
- 1951 With Adelin Linton. *The lore of birthdays*. New York, Henry Schuman.
- 1951 "New light on ancient America." *Scientific Monthly* 72, No.5 (May).
- 1951 "Halloween." *Scientific American* 185, No.4 (October).
- 1951 "The concept of national character" in *Personality and Political Crisis* (A. H. Stanton and S. E. Perry, eds.). Glencoe, Illinois, Free Press.
- 1952 "Women in the family" in *Women, Society, and Sex* (Johnson E. Fairchild, ed.). New York, Sheridan House.
- 1952 "Universal ethical principles: an anthropological view" in *Moral Principles of Action* (Ruth Nanda Anshen, ed.). Science of Culture Series, Vol. VI. New York, Harper and Bros.
- 1952 "Culture and personality factors effecting economic growth" in *The Progress of Underdeveloped Areas* (Bert Hoselitz, ed.), pp. 73 ff. Chicago, Ill., University of Chicago Press.
- 1953 "An anthropological view of economics" in *Goals of Economic Life* (A. Dudley Ward, ed.), pp. 305 ff. New York, Harper and Bros.
- 1953 "The proper study." *Saturday Review of Literature*, pp. 38-39 (April 4th).