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Memorial to Theodora Kroeber Quinn (1897-1979)



THEODORA KROEBER QUINN died in Berkeley on July 4th 1979. Her book, *Ishi in Two Worlds*, is the most widely read book on a California Indian subject or on an American Indian subject. It is one of the most generally known books that has ever been written on the basis of anthropological observations. It appeared in 1961; the 1976 edition bears the publisher's note that over 500,000 copies were then in print. Additional thousands of copies have appeared in the version for children, and in translation into Danish, Swedish, French,

Russian, Polish, Italian, Japanese, Spanish, and German.

Readers of this journal will not have to be reminded in detail about what a fine book of anthropology and of art it is. Theodora Kroeber Quinn wove the account into a beautifully written story, one that is faithful to the anthropological records, evocative of Yahi culture, gripping in its telling of the encounter between the tribelet and the whites, informative about the early years of anthropology at the University of California, and moving in its portrait of the man, Ishi.

For anthropologists, her book *Alfred Kroeber, a Personal Configuration*, is an equally good, perhaps an even more important accomplishment. Kroeber had considered writing an autobiography, he once told me, but had not done so because he thought that there had not been enough variation and excitement in his life to make for interesting reading. From the time of their marriage in 1925 to his death in 1960, Theodora shared not only his personal life but shared also in some of his professional activities. When she began to write the biography, she correctly saw that the very qualities that Kroeber had deprecated were central to an account of his important life and work. "To tell anything of him is to become aware of the pattern and the configuration which are at the heart of the person and personality . . . Kroeber was more of a piece than are many of us, his life pattern deeply cut, clearly outlined."

The personal configuration she wrote is

done with her characteristic clarity and grace, in a flowing style that gives no hint of the inherent difficulties she found in the writing. She combined a fair, ethnologist's depiction with an insight into Kroeber as a person and into her own feelings. The book is more than an account of the life and work of a major anthropologist; it is a portrait of an unusual, attractive man; it sketches a lively family; it tells us something about Theodora herself as person, wife, companion, anthropologist, writer. The book deftly conveys something of the spirit of anthropology, of the ethos of anthropologists.

She was born in Colorado in 1897 to Charles and Phebe Kracaw (hence "Krakie," the name her friends used). She and her two brothers were raised in the mining town of Telluride, Colorado. She entered the University of California, Berkeley, graduated in 1919 and earned a Master's degree in Clinical Psychology in 1920. Married soon after and soon widowed, she became interested in anthropology and met Alfred Kroeber when she came to consult him about doing graduate work.

The four children of their family commanded her full attention and energies while they were growing up. The three sons, Clifton, Theodore, and Karl, are now, respectively, Professors of History, Psychology, and English. Ursula, the youngest, is Ursula K. LeGuin, one of America's leading writers. Generations of those who were graduate students at Berkeley remember fondly Theodora's hospitality, her humor, her warmth.

Her first published paper, done with Clements and Schenk, appeared in the *American Anthropologist* in 1926. In 1959, her first book, *The Inland Whale*, appeared. It is a collection of California Indian myths, sensitively retold. It was well received. From then on, she wrote consistently, mainly on anthropological subjects but also articles with other themes, a short story, two novels. In several of her anthropological writings, she makes

special mention of the friendship, advice, and help of Robert Heizer. She and Heizer were co-editors of the 1979 documentary history of Ishi. She received a number of honors. In 1977, she was appointed a Regent of the University of California.

While she was working on the collection of photographs, *Almost Ancestors: The First Californians*, she met John Quinn, who was then with the Sierra Club, original publishers of that volume. He encouraged her to complete the biography of Alfred Kroeber that she was having difficulty in finishing. They were married in 1969. During the years of their marriage, she came to share his interests in art. In March 1979, when it was clear that she was gravely ill, John Quinn suggested that she write a brief piece about herself. She did, and after her death it was privately printed. Its final paragraph is this: "The day I do not write so much as a single pesky paragraph is never quite so good and satisfactory and complete a day as that on which I write something 'creative.' Even if it is only that single pesky paragraph . . . As one writes, so one lives I suppose, if one is a writer."

Her writing did not come easily; she wrote slowly, with much rewriting. But, as she says, writing was a central and rewarding part of her life. It has been rewarding also for anthropologists, particularly those interested in California Indians. Through her singular gift of communication, something about Native Americans and the anthropologists who study them has been conveyed to a vast audience in many parts of the world.

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