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Margaret Mead

If anything is certain, it is that Margaret Mead did not go gently into the night. At 77, there was too much still to be done, too many budding young scholars needing a push or a grant from her earnings from writing and lecturing, and too much human and political foolishness to be scolded. Life was her great adventure and she went to the ends of the earth to find its meanings. A determined popularizer of the human side of science and a foe of pretentiousness, she waited all too long before the establishment unbent and granted her belated honors.

Margaret Mead, despite her deep religious sense, would not welcome a churchyard eulogy. She would tell us that if we really cared, we would take up where she left off. Continuity of her work and interests would mean something, particularly the encouragement of field research on the life-styles and social systems of remote and depleting communities bending before the rising winds of modernism. She spoke often and with feeling about how little time there was left, not knowing how little remained for herself. In what she wrote, she fused her scholarship with a cross-cultural message that helped her own countrymen to understand themselves.

Science and humanities came together at Margaret Mead's hands. Science was a method for seeing, in an ordered pattern, the elements of social behavior in diverse environments—not simply as sterile reporting but as capturing the human experience. She used her discipline to articulate dignity and reverence for life and the universal human struggle. And this led her straight to sensing the interdependence of cultures, to the view that we must hang together through the bridging of philosophies, traditions, arts, literature, and institutions. She did not decry the progress of science and technology but hailed the possibilities of satellites, computers, and aerospace technology as tools of science for sharing education, knowledge, beauty, and communication on the global scale. Margaret Mead could bury herself in a fishing village of 100 souls and still keep her perspective of a swarming and predatory larger world with equal capacities for goodness and mischief, and dream that it might yet save itself.

When Margaret Mead made up her mind that something was worth doing, she gave it all that she had. Such was the case with the AAAS. Through the years of her service on committees and on the Board of Directors, and later as president, board chairman, and retired president, she was at the forefront of efforts to beat off parochialism in science and to get the most out of interdisciplinary thought and communication. The regularity of her attendance at board meetings was phenomenal, and one remembers how she would fly nonstop from the other side of the world, fighting fatigue and sickness, to take her seat at the table on time. She had made a promise, and her promises were her bond.

Margaret Mead's death came as the Board of Directors of the AAAS arrived in Peking for a visit and an experience that would have absorbed her completely. Science, which for years had been underground in China, suddenly was in the foreground. More than once in the first days of the visit, Chinese scholars broke the ice with references to Margaret Mead and her work as a scientist with a knack for getting through to people. And when the telegram came, the sadness was not confined to the visiting Americans. Margaret Mead would have understood, better than most, the traumas through which China has gone in what must seem an endless century. She would have grasped the implications of overlaying instant modernization on a system that in countless ways is still rooted in the ages. What a field laboratory for a cultural anthropologist!

In the attic rooms of the American Museum of Natural History, where for 55 years Margaret Mead dispensed learning, opinion, and an occasional thunderbolt, an ending is fused with a beginning. An extraordinary vitality is stilled and some light has dimmed. The unfinished notes and memorabilia lie all about. The continuity is interrupted. It need not be broken, if we care enough. The idea of moving "Towards a Human Science," the theme of Margaret Mead's presidential address to the AAAS in 1976, is there to be seized.—WILLIAM D. CAREY