

R. M. Yerkes, Psychobiologist

Robert Mearns Yerkes, one of America's greatest psychologists or psychobiologists, as he preferred to be called, was born in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, 26 May 1876, and died in New Haven, Connecticut, 3 February 1956.

Yerkes' life illustrates the power, in a scientific career, of a fruitful idea. He reported that when he was still a graduate student at Harvard, he suddenly became convinced that what was needed to unlock the complex problems of human and animal behavior was a research institute for the comparative study of mammals and man, with special reference to the great apes. The idea for this program occurred to him in 1900. By laboring for more than half a century, and in spite of great financial difficulties, he was able to transform this important plan into an effective reality.

After taking his undergraduate degree at Ursinus College, he went to Harvard in 1897. He stayed there as a graduate student and faculty member for 20 scientifically valuable years. During this period he organized and developed work in animal or comparative psychology at Harvard. While in Cambridge he also applied the techniques of the biologically trained psychologist to a number of applied problems in human psychology. For 5 years, for example, he gave half of his time to psychological service and research in the psychopathic department of the Boston State Hospital. Here his famous point scale for measuring mental ability was developed.

In 1917 he accepted an invitation to go to the University of Minnesota to organize, in a new and enlarged way, its work in all areas of psychology. He at once began recruiting an outstanding staff for the department. But he himself was destined never to take up residence in Minnesota. Before he could begin work there, World War I intervened. At that time he was president of the American Psychological Association, and, greatly to the advantage of the nation and of the psychological profession, he

at once offered to mobilize American psychologists for the war effort.

As a result of the work that he initiated, more than 400 psychologists and trained assistants gave intelligence tests to 1,726,966 inductees. The results of this first large-scale use of group tests were later issued, under Yerkes' direction, as a monumental volume, *Psychological Examining in the United States Army*, published by the National Academy of Sciences in 1921. This book did much to set the pattern of applied psychological work for the period between the two world wars.

At the end of hostilities he was anxious to proceed with his plans for the development of an institute for comparative behavior research. But he was prevailed on to stay in Washington to assist in the establishment of the many peacetime programs of the new National Research Council. During this period he demonstrated his great ability as an organizer and as a creative worker in a broad range of fields related to scientific manpower policy and utilization. Even today it is hard to find any area of scientific manpower work, such as the analytical listing of scientists, the development of fellowship programs, or the recording of the topics and scope of research in progress, that was not planned at this time by Yerkes.

At length, in 1924, he did return to academic work as a professor in the new Institute of Psychology at Yale. From this time on, his research and his publications more and more mark the development of his great motivating idea for an institute for the comparative study of behavior. In 1929, with the expert collaboration of his able wife, Ada W. Yerkes, he published *The Great Apes: a Study of Anthropoid Life*. This volume of more than 650 pages showed, for the first time in a complete way, the scientific world the importance of comparative anthropoid studies.

In 1930, with the assistance of Yale University and the Rockefeller Founda-

tion, Yerkes began the erection of the basic buildings of the Yale Laboratories of Primate Biology at Orange Park, Florida. This unique station for the study of the great apes was renamed the Yerkes Laboratories of Primate Biology at the time of its founder's retirement in 1942.

The location of this laboratory on Florida's St. Johns River, about 15 miles from the city of Jacksonville, was based on a careful study of climate, records of storms, and all other environmental matters relevant to the establishment of a breeding and study colony in which the great apes could live under satisfactory and natural conditions. A list of the names of the scientists who have worked and been trained at this station and a study of the approximately 400 research papers that have been issued there attest to the fruitfulness of Yerkes' original idea that led to the establishment of the laboratory.

During World War II, Yerkes again offered his talents as an organizer to the service of the nation. At this time he had an opportunity to note how unfortunate for the country had been the abandonment of some of the programs that he had started during World War I and that he had attempted to foster, at the National Research Council, in the period of demobilization and peace following that conflict. Because of his broad experience in national affairs, Yerkes devoted much of his time during World War II, and after its close, to developing plans by means of which civilian scientists and regular military leaders could be kept in effective contact with each other in the solution of the ever new problems that result from progress in the techniques used in the defense of the nation.

There is a deep symbolism in the fact that Yerkes' last paper was entitled "The biologist's point of view." In all his work this had indeed been his approach to the problems of behavior and of mind. This way of understanding psychology was seen in his own research, in the investigations of his students, and in the unique laboratory that he brought into being. As a result of his wisdom and energy, many positive forward steps have been made possible in the scientific understanding of human and animal behavior. He was a pioneer who had, to a rare degree, the energy and diligence necessary to transform original ideas into effective accomplishment.

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