

The following obituary by University of Vermont Professor Emeritus William E. Mitchell was published in slightly truncated form in the American Anthropologist in 2005.

Rhoda Metraux (1914-2003), a prominent anthropologist in Washington and New York from WWII until her retirement to Vermont in 1980, died of Alzheimer's disease in a nursing home in Barton, Vermont on November 26, 2003. She was 89 years old. A psychological anthropologist, Metraux was a pioneer in the cultural analysis of media and literary materials and published widely on topics related to cultural imagery, national character, culture and psychotherapy, personality and culture, childhood, aging, learning, culture change, deviance, and qualitative methods of data collection. She did fieldwork in Haiti, Mexico, Argentina, and Montserrat in the West Indies and among the Iatmul of Papua New Guinea. She also collaborated in anthropological research on the cultures of Germany, France, pre-revolutionary China and the United States.

Although Metraux occasionally taught in academic settings, e.g. New York University's School of Education, the New Jersey Neuro-Psychiatric Institute, and the Postgraduate Center for Psychotherapy in New York, she eschewed a teaching career. She worked instead on a succession of anthropological research projects funded, e.g., by the National Science Foundation, the National Research Council, the Office of Naval Research, Social Science Research Council, UNESCO, and the National Institutes of Health. Three of Metraux' most important publications, each very different from the other, are *The Study of Culture at a Distance* (1953) and *A Way of Seeing* (1970) with Margaret Mead and *Psychotherapy and Culture* (1987) with Theodora M. Abel and Samuel Roll. During a long and active career her life and work intersected in strategic ways with a number of the 21st century's most illustrious anthropologists including Bronislaw Malinowski, Alfred Metraux, Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead.

Born on October 18, 1914 in Brooklyn, NY as Rhoda Bubendy, she lived with her banker father and mother, both of German descent, and an older brother. When Metraux was two her father died and she went to live with her mother and brother in her maternal grandparent's Brooklyn home where both English and German were spoken. Her grandfather had come to America in the 1870's for an apprenticeship in international banking and was a friend of Franz Boas whom Metraux knew as a child. A precocious student, she advanced rapidly through school graduating from high school at fifteen. Too young for a residential college, Metraux continued her education at the Packer Collegiate Institute in Brooklyn Heights for two years. A summer trip to Germany in 1932 when 17, her first trip abroad, alerted her to Hitler's rising influence; the Nazis swept the July elections to become the dominant party in the Reichstag.

Metraux entered Vassar College that fall with junior year standing and graduated in 1934 with a major in English literature. She married Arthur B. Proctor III, a West Point graduate and they moved to Fort Hoyle, a field artillery post in Maryland. After his sudden death by suicide in the fall of 1935, Metraux returned to New York where she enrolled in a secretarial school then got a job at Oxford University Press. She took an apartment on Bank Street in Greenwich Village, the New York neighborhood she found most congenial and where she lived most of her professional life. While at the Press she

experimented with her own writing but in terms of a career in publishing was chagrined that the best editorial positions went to men, not women.

The trajectory of Metraux' life radically changed in the fall of 1939 at a Yale cocktail party where she met Bronislaw Malinowski, recently come to Yale from the University of London. Hearing him talk engagingly about the field of anthropology she became enthused about the possibilities of a new career. Already convinced that for her publishing was a dead end, she enrolled in a course on social structure taught by Malinowski at the New School for Social Research. Conversations with him also persuaded her that anthropology could provide a viable and intellectually exciting career.

In 1940 Metraux moved to New Haven to begin work on a doctorate in anthropology under Malinowski. WWII had erupted in Europe in September 1939 with the German Blitzkrieg invasion of Poland. In June 1940 France fell and the next year saw the German invasion of Russia and the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. In an interview with Nina Swidler (1989:262) Metraux noted that "The war and the discovery of anthropology are one and the same to me, the horror of one being supported by the wonderful possibilities of the other." She liked her courses but found her fellow graduate students uninformed about the world and was irked that the few student fellowships and paid jobs in the Human Relations Area files went exclusively to the male students. Metraux and her two fellow female students received no administrative financial aide.

One of her first courses was with Alfred Metraux , a Swiss by birth, who was 12 years her senior and a visiting professor. Not yet 40, his research on the Tupinamba Indians of Brazil and on Easter Island was widely recognized. Rhoda and Alfred began dating almost immediately and were married in March of 1941. In retirement she wryly remembered department chair George Peter Murdock's comment at the end of the academic year: "Isn't it wonderful? All the women students in my department have found husbands" (Swidler 1989:263).

In the summer of 1941, the Metrauxs went to Haiti for the first time as a combined honeymoon and exploratory field trip. The Catholic clergy were waging a campaign against the local Voodoo beliefs and practices and Alfred reports seeing drums and ritual objects piled high at a priest's residence awaiting an *auto-de-f³/₄* (A. Metraux 1989:263). It was Rhoda's first field trip and she soon discovered that her experienced and assertive husband's style of fieldwork was very different from hers. Shy and reserved, she felt they were a good team. "I sat and people came and told me what they were thinking about, and Alfred got people talking about things" (Swidler 1989:263). Although she liked fieldwork, she never became easy with people. In a 1970 letter to a neophyte fieldworker friend she writes:

I wish I were more easily outgoing. . . . In the field there is always a context, but even so I am sure most field workers find at least the simpler things 100 times faster than I do; still, one can always sit and watch. But otherwise I can tell myself, "Take the first step" or "Now it's your turn"—and am still wordless. The result is that I often spend weeks in

New York without talking with anyone at all, except, of course, to ask such things as, “Do you have any limes?”

Shy yes, but it was her ability to laugh at her self that was endearing to those who knew her well. A sensitive and highly observant woman, Metraux’s shyness was misperceived by some as emotional aloofness and she could be cool and imperious when confronted with hubris or rudeness. But in an intellectual argument with peers, focused intently and leaning forward, she folded her hands into tight pumping fists as she insisted on a point, often a subtle one that a listener might not grasp with the clarity that she did.

That September the Metrauxs left New York for Washington where Alfred joined the Smithsonian Institution to work with Julian Steward on the celebrated *Handbook of the South American Indians*. In December 1942 the US came into the war and Washington began recruiting social scientists for war work. Margaret Mead left the American Museum of Natural History in New York to be the executive secretary of the National Research Council’s Committee on Food Habits and Metraux applied to be her research assistant. Mead, always innovative, told her to analyze radio soap operas, popular magazine articles and some essays on food habits by college women. She was to look for insights about America’s response to the war and return in a week with her results. Metraux got the job; it was the beginning of a long professional and personal relationship that continued until Mead’s death in 1978.

In their work on wartime consumer problems, e.g., hoarding and rationing, Mead and Metraux began to develop their qualitative methods for collecting and analyzing large samples of cultural materials including open-ended interviews, brief essays, first-hand observations and published materials (Metraux 1943). When Alfred was invited to Mexico to teach for a term, Rhoda went too and made an observational study of Mexican responses to wartime food shortages for the U.S. Department of Agriculture and an analysis of Mexican food habits for the Committee on Food Habits. On her return to Washington Metraux became a member of the Planning Staff, Office of Strategic Services (1943-45). There she worked on questions of German civilian morale and continued to experiment with methods for the qualitative analysis of cultural materials.

With the end of WWII, the Metrauxs moved to Great Neck on Long Island. Alfred commuted to his new appointment in the Department of Social Affairs at the United Nations and Rhoda to Columbia University--where Mead had returned as an adjunct professor--to complete her Ph.D. in anthropology. In 1947 Ruth Benedict inaugurated the Human Resources Columbia University Research in Contemporary Cultures (RCC) with a generous grant from the Office of Naval Research. A principle goal was the development of methods “. . . for analyzing the cultural regularities in the characters of individuals who are members of societies which are inaccessible to direct observation” (Mead and Metraux 1953:3). This pioneering study of “culture at a distance” was to become one of the largest and most influential anthropological projects of the last century. Among the dozens of research participants were Mead, who became director of the project on Benedict’s death in September 1948, Alfred and Rhoda Metraux, Conrad Arensberg, Geoffrey Gorer, Jane Belo, Eric Wolf, Eleanor Leacock,

John Weakland, Sula Benet, Ruth Bunzel, Mark Zborowski, Natalie Joffe, Martha Wolfenstein, Erik Erikson, Ruth Landes, and Frances Macgregor. Among the cultures studied at a distance were East European Jews, Poland, China, Russia and France. Rhoda Metraux succeeded Geoffrey Gorer as convener of the French group and, on the basis of the collected materials, published *Themes in French Culture* (1954) with Margaret Mead. Although a reviewer (Landes 1955) had some minor caveats regarding the latter, he recognized it as an experimental book utilizing interesting new methodologies, the *American Anthropologist* reviewer, enjoying the immediacy of much of the material even found it “fun to read” (Landes 1955:908).

Metraux worked on the RCC project from September 1947 to November 1948 then returned to Haiti with her husband and their infant son Daniel where Alfred directed a sociological survey in the Maribel valley for UNESCO related to literacy problems and Rhoda collected data for her dissertation. In 1951, she received a Ph.D. from Columbia University with the dissertation, *Kith and Kin: A Study of Creole Social Structure in Marbial* (1952a, 1952b). But Metraux’ most significant writing in the early 1950’s and arguably of her career, was *The Study of Culture at a Distance* (Mead and Metraux 1953), written and compiled in 1950-1952 as the principle methodological document from the RCC project. Although the ideas in the book were developed for the study of national character in societies either remote in time or geography, over fifty years later this imaginative handbook stands as a monument to the kind of fine-grained qualitative research that Mead and Metraux espoused. Now recognized as pioneering classics, both *Themes in French Culture* and *The Study of Culture at a Distance* were reprinted in 2001 by Berghahn Books in New York.

Of special importance in the latter book is Metraux’ sophisticated and multifaceted essay “Resonance in Imagery.” The concept of “image” is central to much of Metraux’s work and she defines it as “any unit in the perceptual system through which individuals are related to one another in a culture. A gesture, a rhythmic figure beaten on a drum, a design sketched on a jug, a line of melody, words describing the prickling feeling of fear—each of these evokes and communicates an image in a different modality” including visual, auditory, kinesthetic and tactile ones (Mead and Metraux 1953:350-351). Because of the unique abilities, skills and experience of different analysts, no two will work precisely in the same way and “the final synthesis which each constructs will reflect an individual relationship to the culture” (Mead and Metraux 1953:360). In this and other ways Metraux’s early work anticipates some of the open approaches of interpretative anthropology and the postmodern premise that there is no single authoritative construct of a culture.

Three other important publications by Metraux (1955 a, b, c) based on the RCC methodology were on German national character. In one of these studies, Metraux (1953a) looks at the literature on childcare and youth guidance for insights into German views about parenting and the general upbringing of children. In another (Metraux 1955b) she explores juvenile fiction for insight into the psychosocial dynamics of German family life. In the third study she examines German school children’s written responses to a series of story plots where a child is described as doing something wrong.

The three studies taken together provide a provocative view of the German family and childhood and illustrate the type of intricate and subtle analysis that characterizes her work.

With Alfred based in Paris with UNESCO, Rhoda in 1953-54 went to Montserrat, a small island in the British West Indies, with her five-year-old son and his Haitian nurse, Tulia—a memorable member of the Metraux household for many years-- to make a study of cultural imagery. She chose the island for its contrast to Haiti and settled in the village of Danio. The clinical psychologist Theodora Abel joined Metraux for a month midway to administer a set of projective tests. Among the topics they address in their publications are sex differences (Abel and Metraux 1959) and deviance (Metraux and Abel 1957); other findings are presented *en passant* in *Psychotherapy and Culture* (Abel, Metraux and Roll 1987), one of Metraux's last significant publications.

In 1955, Metraux bought a house on Waverly Place in the west village. She, Daniel and Tulia occupied the two top stories and Margaret Mead, divorced from Gregory Bateson in 1950, lived on the two lower floors with her daughter Mary Catherine Bateson. The house was a frequent oasis for visiting anthropologists, intellectual and artist friends and the occasional liberal politician. Mead's Columbia graduate students, of whom I was one, were sometimes included in the festivities that included a party for Louis S. B. Leakey and a memorable New Years Eve with champagne served at midnight. Alfred Metraux occasionally visited from Paris until he and Rhoda were divorced in 1959.

Metraux liked group research and her superb organizational skills and attention to detail were always an appreciated asset. In 1954-57 she joined a multidisciplinary project directed by Dr. Harold G. Wolff at Cornell University Medical College-New York Hospital. The research staff included the professions of medicine, psychiatry, clinical psychology, anthropology and sociology. The project's concern was with the medical and psychosocial aspects of stress among New York Chinese unable to return to Communist China after the revolution (Hinkle et. al. 1957). For a time I joined the project as her research assistant and learned firsthand of her skill in organizing complex research materials and of her kindness as a generous mentor who taught by example more than by categorical instruction. As one came to know her, not an easy venture for some, she became a loyal and caring friend with a mischievous sense of humor that belied her usual quietly elegant demeanor.

The popular woman's magazine Redbook in 1962 invited Mead to write a regular column. Although the magazine insisted that the articles appear under Mead's name the thinking and writing was a joint venture between her and Metraux. Lacking a secure institutional position, the articles also provided Metraux with a basic income. Without Metraux's strong creative and editorial input, it is doubtful that Mead could have continued the column until her death at such a high level. The articles (1963 to 1979) range widely over a gamut of interesting topics from "race and intelligence" to "the nudist idea" and the sharp critical intelligence and experience of the two women is vivid on almost every page. During those years an evening with Metraux and Mead was always

enlivened for a time with clashing approaches or solutions to a problem they were thinking through. Although their friends knew the extent of Metraux's participation in the articles, the public would not know until a collection of them appeared in book form (Mead and Metraux 1970). In 1966, their children grown, Metraux and Mead moved to a large apartment on Central Park West near the American Museum of Natural History, Mead's principal institution. Metraux maintained a desk in Mead's tower office with the Museum title, although unpaid, of Research Associate.

Metraux's last major field research was among the Iatmul of Papua New Guinea. Between 1967 and 1972, she made three field trips, each from six to eight months. Her first and longest was to Tambunum village on the Sepik River where Mead and Bateson worked in 1938. The research was part of a large study on cultural imagery that included work by Mead in Manus, Mead and Metraux in Tambunum, and Metraux's work on Montserrat. As planned, Mead spent the initial month in Tambunum during which time I arrived for two months working primarily with the men and censusing the village of about a thousand as Bateson had earlier. Metraux worked hard but her diffident approach to fieldwork in such a large village with a population not especially intrigued with our presence made it difficult. Always an entertaining and insightful correspondent, a few years later she wrote to me from Tambunam to my field site in the mountains far up the Sepik River:

It very likely is so that there are people who can fascinate, mesmerize, compel, amuse, intrigue the Iatmul into entering into an informant relationship and providing information. But not me . . . I wish I could find *one* really aberrant, analytically minded person who liked to *think* and *explain*! GB's [Gregory Bateson] notion that the Iatmul are "intellectual" is an idea I don't grasp at all. Well... that's enough steam for one day!

Partly because the villagers were not especially forthcoming and partly because they did want their music recorded, she took advantage of their one interest and obliged with extensive tape recordings as well as with musical samplings in other Iatmul villages. She began to analyze these data with a paper at the 1970 AAA meetings and then with a fuller paper presented in 1984 in Basel at the Wenner Gren symposium on "Sepik Research Today." An augmented version was her last important publication (Metraux 1990). However most of Metraux's extensive corpus of Iatmul music awaits analysis; it is archived with her other research materials and correspondence with Margaret Mead's papers in the Library of Congress. She is survived by her older brother, Paul Bubendey, her son Daniel Metraux, Professor of Asian Studies, Mary Baldwin College and four grandchildren.