

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 249

“Coming of Age in Samoa”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

“As the traveler who has once been from home is wiser than he who has never left his own doorstep, so a knowledge of one other culture should sharpen our ability to scrutinize more steadily, to appreciate more lovingly, our own.”

Margaret Mead. *Coming of Age in Samoa*.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 249. Coming of Age in Samoa.

Margaret Mead was born on December 16, 1901, in Philadelphia. She was the eldest of five children. Her father, Edward Sherwood Mead, was a professor of finance at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. Her mother, Emily Fogg Mead, was a sociologist who did research on the children of Italian immigrants in America.

The family moved frequently among various Philadelphia suburbs during Margaret’s childhood. These moves were related to her mother’s research project. At various times, they lived in Doylestown, Lansdowne, and Swarthmore in Pennsylvania, and in Hammonton, New Jersey. Margaret’s younger sister Elizabeth would marry William Steig, a popular cartoonist whose work often appeared in *The New Yorker* magazine. Later he would become a writer of books for children, best remembered today as the author of the 1990 children’s picture book *Shrek!* You may have heard of it or of the animated feature film based on it that was released in 2001. Another sister, Priscilla, married writer and humorist Leo Rosten, who immigrated to the United States from the Russian Empire as a child and was best known as the author of *The Education of H*Y*M*A*N K*A*P*L*A*N* and *The Joys of Yiddish*. Rosten has been called the Jewish James Thurber.

Margaret’s future husband, Luther Cressman, once said of her, “I don’t think Margaret ever had an honest-to-God childhood.” She learned to tell other adults that “my father majored in

economics and minored in sociology and my mother majored in sociology and minored in economics” years before she was old enough to understand what that meant. She was intelligent, precocious, and accustomed both to being treated like an adult and being the center of attention. Young Margaret was also a keen student of other people, observing their traits and frequently adopting casual acquaintances she took a fancy to into her large and varied “found family.” These are the traits that would characterize Margaret Mead, the scholar and the person, for the rest of her life.

Margaret’s educational record was spotty, because her parents moved so often and because they took a relaxed attitude toward school, allowing Margaret to go to class or not as she saw fit.

Margaret’s parents were Unitarians turned agnostics, so they didn’t quite know how to deal with it when eleven-year-old Margaret decided on getting baptized and joining the Episcopal Church, or how to cope with a child who insisted on fasting during Lent. “Agnostics never know what to do with post-agnostics,” she would later say.

She attended Doylestown High School during the Great War, where the war effort inspired her to create five posters on the themes of Internationalism, Womanhood, Childhood, Vision, and Religion, five themes would remain central to Margaret Mead’s intellectual journey for the rest of her life.

In June of 1917, she met her future husband, Luther Cressman, whom I’ve already mentioned. The Cressmans were from Pughtown, Pennsylvania; Luther, a junior majoring in classics at Penn State, came to Doylestown for the weekend to visit his older brother George, who taught science at Doylestown High. The Cressman brothers got an invitation to dinner at the Mead house, and Margaret was taken with the tall, handsome Luther, who aspired to become a Lutheran minister. They saw each other whenever they could through the fall of 1917, when they were both in their final years at their respective schools. At Christmastime, they secretly became engaged.

In 1918, just after his graduation from Penn State, Luther joined the Army. The war ended before Luther saw combat, although he did see several men in his unit die of the influenza pandemic. He was discharged a sergeant after the war. In 1919, Luther went off to General Theological Seminary, an Episcopal seminary in the Chelsea neighborhood of Manhattan. That was Margaret’s doing; she had persuaded him to change denominations.

Margaret herself also left for college that autumn. She had wanted to go to Wellesley College, her mother’s alma mater, but her father insisted she attend his alma mater, DePauw University in Greencastle, Indiana. Margaret was not happy about this, so they struck a compromise. She would try DePauw for one year, and if she didn’t like it, her father would agree to let her transfer. She tried it, didn’t like it, and ended up at Barnard College, a school for women in Morningside Heights, Manhattan, adjacent to the then-male-only Columbia University.

Barnard suited her far better than DePauw, and New York City of the Roaring Twenties suited her far better than Greencastle, Indiana or the small Pennsylvania towns she had grown up in. The young women who were her classmates were flappers and freethinkers. They drank bootleg gin, listened to jazz, read *The Nation*, danced the Charleston, bobbed their hair, slept with young men whenever they felt like it, and rode the Staten Island ferry back and forth all night long.

Margaret Mead thrived in this environment and built a wide circle of friends, whom she described as a second family. Nevertheless, she was rather conservative, even dowdy, by the standards of her classmates. She wore glasses and simple dresses that were unrevealing, went to church on Sundays, and saw Luther a couple of times a week. The two of them arranged blind dates between classmates at their respective schools.

But Margaret's closest relationship at Barnard was not with a student, but with an instructor named Ruth Benedict, who was fourteen years older and a graduate student in anthropology at Columbia. In 1921, Benedict taught an undergraduate class in anthropology at Barnard. Margaret Mead was one of her students, and she was smitten, both by the science of anthropology and by Ruth Benedict. Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead would remain close professional associates and friends until Benedict's death in 1948. No one knows for sure, but it is widely believed that their relationship was a romantic one, at least during their school years.

The science of anthropology was in 1921 mired in what Margaret Mead would later describe as the "stupid underbrush of nineteenth-century arguments based on ethnocentric superiority." That's quite a mouthful. Allow me to take a moment to unpack that.

If you've been listening to this podcast from the beginning, you are already well acquainted with the fact that European and American society of this era took it for granted that it was the highest, most enlightened, and most advanced society in the world. The anthropology of the time adopted this worldview, and saw the development of human society as linear. Think of it this way. Individual human beings for the most part live their lives along a predictable, familiar path from birth to crawling to walking to speaking to childhood. Children grow bigger, learn about the world, pass through adolescence, become young adults, then older adults. Human societies were viewed as passing through a similar linear path. For example, it was argued that societies in an early stage of development were organized matrilineally, while more advanced societies organized their families patrilineally. Some anthropologists attempted to classify, or rank, these different stages, using terminology like savage to barbaric to primitive to civilized, each with its own characteristic traits.

The implications of this perspective are twofold. First, it implies that other, less advanced societies, represent a scientific opportunity to investigate the development of our own society. They are windows into our own past. This is how you get to human zoos, where people from some distant land are shipped into Europe or the United States and set up in mock villages where they live out some simulacrum of their daily lives back home for the edification of gawking

white tourists. I mentioned this custom back in episode 26. Where live humans were not available, museums installed dioramas, three-dimensional models, sometimes miniature, sometimes life size, of a community of people from some other society in their natural habitat, so to speak, performing tasks typical of their daily lives. Or of what Western anthropologists believed were typical of their daily lives. The human figures in these dioramas were often scantily clad, or even nude, for purely scientific reasons, you understand.

Second, this 19th-century perspective suggests that our society's relationship to these presumed-to-be more primitive societies was analogous to the relationship that adults have to children. Effectively, humans in other societies are like children who lack parents. It is therefore the duty of Europeans and Americans to fill this parental role, as protectors and nurturers. And teachers.

And, when necessary, as disciplinarians. All in service of the goal of leading these other societies to adulthood, when they would become like us.

Often this parent-child analogy would be applied at the individual level as well. Individual members of these "primitive" societies were seen not as adults but more like children in adult bodies, lacking the wherewithal to make grown-up decisions without assistance.

Nowhere was this "stupid underbrush" thicker than in the United States, which at this time was home to what is sometimes called the American school of anthropology, which argued that people of different races were physiologically and biologically distinct, perhaps even separate species, which provided a scientific underpinning for slavery and segregation. In this view, less advanced societies are less advanced because they are made up of people who are less advanced biologically. This is how you get the US Supreme Court ruling in 1857 holding that people of African descent were "beings of an inferior order...so far inferior that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect." That's also how you get the "Anthropology Days" of the 1904 World's Fair. That's how you get the eugenics movement we looked at last week.

As popular as this attitude was, in certain circles, by the early decades of the twentieth century, the currents of modern science were beginning to flow in the opposite direction, just as Margaret Mead was coming of age in America.

The most important figure in American anthropology at the turn of the twentieth century, the person who led American anthropology out of the darkness of primitive superstition and into the enlightenment of modern science, so to speak, was a German immigrant named Franz Boas. Boas did field work among the native Inuit on Baffin Island in Canada during his early years, and living among these people, he noted that many Inuit customs that might seem exotic or primitive to a German proved to be quite practical, even sophisticated, once winter came. He wrote, "I often ask myself what advantages our 'good society' possesses over that of the 'savages' and find, the more I see of their customs, that we have no right to look down upon them..."

Boas argued that all human beings had equal intellectual capacity and essentially the same goals in life. The differences among human societies were cultural. A given society's culture was partly determined by circumstance, partly by exposure to new ideas, and partly by historical accident. If you begin your investigation of another culture by assuming its inferiority, your observations will be tainted and your conclusions a pointless exercise in circular logic. Boas advocated cultural relativism, the view that no one culture is better than another, as the only scientific way to approach anthropology. And more than that, he dared to argue that the study of other cultures could help provide a framework which would grant us better insight into our own.

Boas's ideas were controversial at the time, though they are the accepted wisdom of the field today. He became professor of anthropology at Columbia University in 1899, where he developed the first Ph.D. program in anthropology in the United States. His students would go on to teach anthropology at other universities and found other anthropology departments, and they took his ideas with them.

Franz Boas was 63 years old when Margaret Mead first heard of him. He was still at Columbia and still teaching Ph.D. candidates, including Ruth Benedict. Margaret Mead was so taken with Ruth Benedict's course that she began praising it to everyone she talked to, and Margaret Mead talked to a lot of people and was always bubbling with enthusiasm. The next semester, twice as many people took the course. Margaret Mead was not yet 21 years old, but she had already begun her career as the woman who popularized anthropology.

Through Benedict, Margaret Mead met the other Columbia graduate students in anthropology and Franz Boas. She began sitting in on his lectures, which was against the rules at Columbia but Franz Boas wasn't exactly a stickler about such things. After she earned her bachelor's in psychology at Barnard in 1923, she married Luther Cressman, and they moved in together in New York, he completing his seminary program, she beginning her graduate program. Margaret kept her maiden name, which shocked most of her family and friends but not Luther.

Nevertheless, their different career paths pulled them apart. Margaret never attended the churches Luther served; Luther never fit in when Margaret and Ruth Benedict and their friends got together to talk about anthropology.

Margaret had always wanted to earn a master's in psychology, which she did in 1924. For her thesis, she followed in her mother's footsteps, studying the children of Italian immigrants. She examined the question of why Italian-American children scored lower on IQ tests than other children and concluded the discrepancy was explained by language and cultural differences, not by any difference in innate intelligence. I mentioned this research last week and explained how it played a role in discrediting the eugenics movement.

But even before she finished her master's, she had already decided next to pursue a Ph.D. in anthropology. At first, she expected her anthropological research would also be among immigrant communities in the US, but Franz Boas steered her in a different direction. He

discussed with her other societies in other parts of the world and mentioned that Polynesians were likely the least-studied people on Earth. Polynesians. Huh. That was enough to get her started. She wrote a paper on tattoos in various Polynesian cultures, looking at the different styles employed in different societies and presented it at an anthropological conference in Toronto in 1924.

Meanwhile, Franz Boas had gotten into a debate with another anthropologist about adolescence. Was adolescence and the awkwardness, the unhappiness, and the pain it entailed a natural consequence of the biology of growing up, as the other fellow argued? Or was Boas right when he countered that adolescence was essentially a twentieth-century invention, the result of how modern Western culture rears its children? The very word *teenager* was in fact only coined in the year 1922.

This question was right up Margaret's alley, combining as it did anthropology with psychology. She proposed to do field work in Polynesia, comparing the experience of adolescence there to that of young people in the Western world in order to tease out which aspects of the experience were biological and which were cultural. I said young people, but Mead insisted on studying specifically the experience of young women. It has been said that anthropology of this time came in two forms: men studying men, and men studying bones. Margaret Mead set out to try something different. She and Boas discussed in which part of Polynesia she should do her research. Some possibilities were remote, hard to get to, even dangerous. Boas suggested a relatively safe and easy destination for a citizen of the United States: American Samoa.

[music: Kahn, Erdman, and Russo, "Toot, Toot, Tootsie (Goo'Bye!)"]

The Samoan archipelago was first settled probably in the 11th century. By the late 19th century, the United States, Britain, and Germany had made competing claims to the islands. This was finally resolved in 1899, when the islands were divided. The British conceded their claims in Samoa to Germany in exchange for colonial concessions elsewhere, and so most of the archipelago and its inhabitants came under German control, while a smaller portion of both, representing the eastern islands, came under US control. No one consulted the Samoans themselves about any of this.

After the Great War, the former German Samoa came under a League of Nations mandate administered by New Zealand. American Samoa hosted a Navy station and was effectively administered by the US Navy. The 1918 influenza pandemic was brought to the islands by a ship from New Zealand. It killed about 20% of the population of Western Samoa, and incited unrest among the Samoans, who blamed New Zealand. In American Samoa, a more effective pandemic response led to far fewer deaths and less unrest.

In 1916, the British writer W. Somerset Maugham, traveling in the Pacific, was forced into quarantine during a stopover in Pago Pago, the capital of American Samoa. He would later incorporate that experience into a provocative short story about a prostitute named Sadie

Thompson and a missionary named Davidson who tries to reform her, with tragic results for the missionary. Originally titled “Miss Thompson,” this story was published in 1921 in the American magazine *The Smart Set*, edited by H.L. Mencken—remember him?—and aimed at young sophisticates of the Roaring Twenties. In 1922, it was adapted into a stage play titled *Rain*. Maugham subsequently retitled the story to match. *Rain* was made into motion pictures three times: a 1928 silent film *Sadie Thompson*, starring Gloria Swanson and Lionel Barrymore, a 1932 film, *Rain*, starring Joan Crawford and Walter Huston, and a 1953 musical, *Miss Sadie Thompson*, starring Rita Hayworth and José Ferrer. Those of us Americans of a certain age also recall how Sonny and Cher would eventually turn Sadie Thompson and the preacher into a recurring skit on their TV variety show in the 1970s.

Margaret Mead was presumably aware of the short story, published four years earlier, and the play, which premiered in New York while she was at Barnard, when her ship docked at Pago Pago in August 1925. She was 23 years old. She spent six weeks at the same hotel where Maugham was quarantined eight years earlier; there she spent time studying the Samoan language. She then proceeded to the island of Ta’u, where she lived with a US Navy Pharmacist’s Mate, his wife, and their children.

For the next nine months, she spent her days among the Samoans, meeting with them, living among them, and discussing with them their culture and values, with an emphasis on the experiences of adolescence among teenage girls.

I’ll attempt here to summarize her findings. This is only a rough summary, of course. She did write a whole book about it, after all. In essence, Mead reported that adolescence as we know it in our culture was unknown in Samoa. Samoans did not record the birthdays of their children. Child development was gauged not by a calendar but by observation of the child. A child was considered a child, with few expectations placed upon them, until they began behaving like an adult, at which time they married and had children of their own. This meant that to a certain extent, teenagers only became adults once they decided for themselves they felt ready to be adults.

The girls Mead interviewed indicated to her that they were in no hurry to make the transition into adulthood. Mead observed that, in sharp contrast to Western society, children in Samoan society became familiar at an early age with many aspects of life that children are shielded from in Western society: things like menstruation, sexual relations, childbirth, breastfeeding, and death. Also, these Samoan teenagers, regarded as children with few expectations placed upon them, were frequently prone to sneaking away from their elders after dark, and getting up to a lot of casual sexual contact before they got around to growing up and getting married.

Drawing on the work of Sigmund Freud, who was by this time regarded as a giant in the field of psychology, Mead concluded that the pain and trauma that come with adolescence are not biological, but are in fact a consequence of Western childrearing methods which keep the most

important facts of life away from children for the first decade or two of their lives, and then suddenly dump it all on them without any preparation, leaving them to sort out their feelings about them in a cultural environment that discourages any kind of discussion and offers no support.

Margaret Mead began her journey home from Samoa by traveling to Sydney, where she boarded a passenger steamer bound for England via the Suez Canal. She planned to disembark at Marseilles, where she would meet up with Luther. While Margaret was in Samoa, her husband was spending a year studying in England, which he had arranged more to give himself something to do while his wife was away than anything. He was lonely, and beginning to question his faith and his commitment to the ministry.

When the ship docked at Marseilles, Luther waited and waited for Margaret. She would be the last passenger to leave the ship. That's because during the trip, she met and fell in love with Reo Fortune, a white New Zealander with a Maori given name. He was a year younger than her, and like her, studied psychology at first and was now on his way to Cambridge to earn a Ph.D. in anthropology. At Marseilles, Reo had done his best to convince Margaret to remain on the ship and travel with him to England. She wavered, but decided against it. Nevertheless, she explained to Luther what had happened, and they would soon divorce. In later years, Margaret Mead would describe Luther as her "student husband," much to his irritation.

Luther Cressman remarried, left the ministry, and got a Ph.D. in anthropology at Columbia in 1928, a year ahead of his ex-wife, as it would turn out, and afterward became a professor at the University of Oregon, where he founded its Department of Anthropology. In 1938, he discovered a pair of bark sandals in a cave in Oregon that were more than 9,000 years old, making them the oldest human footwear ever discovered, and one of the oldest human artifacts of any kind discovered in North America. He died in 1994, and is most remembered in anthropological circles for the discovery of those sandals, or possibly for being Margaret Mead's first husband.

Back in New York, Mead would get her first real job in 1926, as an assistant curator at the American Museum of Natural History. She got this position because her boss believed that curator was a good job for a woman; it was just like housekeeping. She was fortunate in this. It was a good job for her at a time when there were few positions for anthropologists, and even fewer for women anthropologists.

Mead would work out of an unusual location, an office in a sixth-floor turret of the museum, overlooking the intersection of Columbus Avenue and 77th Street. This turret would be the center of her professional work for the next 43 years. She would continue to work as an assistant curator, and later a curator, at the museum until 1969.

For now though, she had her museum job, she taught at Columbia, and she worked on her doctoral dissertation, entitled "An Inquiry into the Question of Cultural Stability in Polynesia." She was also writing an account of her work for a general audience. This one was titled *Coming*

of Age in Samoa. After one publisher rejected it, she approached William Morrow, an Irish-American who had just founded his own publishing house, William Morrow and Company. Morrow liked the manuscript, but he wanted more. He asked Mead to add two additional chapters that would examine the question of what her findings in Samoa meant for contemporary America. Franz Boas wrote the book's introduction.

In 1928, after her divorce was final, Margaret Mead traveled to the Admiralty Islands, off the northern coast of Papua New Guinea, for further field work among the children of Manus Island, to investigate whether these children experienced the same modes of thinking that Sigmund Freud described as prevalent among children and people of less-developed societies. Reo Fortune went with her and did his own field work alongside her, studying the local religion. They married in Auckland, New Zealand, en route to the Admiralty Islands.

Afterward, Margaret Mead returned to New York to discover that her book, *Coming of Age in Samoa*, published during her sojourn in the Admiralty Islands, was racking up reviews and sales far beyond anything she or her publisher ever could have dreamed of. Reviewers called it "fascinating, valuable, and instructive," "a first-rate piece of descriptive anthropology," and "an outstanding achievement." *The Nation's* reviewer, alluding to the image that Pacific islands had in the American popular imagination, wrote that readers would "probably be astonished to discover how like a South Sea island that South Sea island can be..."

Critics complained that Margaret Mead had conflated culture with sex; she responded by pointing out that only 68 out of the 297 pages of her book talked about sex, though those were the pages everyone else was talking about. Royalties from the book made her more money than her job at the museum, and her new career, writing about anthropology for a popular audience, got Margaret Mead through the Great Depression quite comfortably.

In the nature-versus-nurture debate, Mead had come down decisively in favor of nurture. The pain of adolescence, her work seemed to show, was not a matter of biology. It was not rooted in "raging hormones," but in the shortcomings of Western culture. The pain of adolescence is something we inflict upon our own children.

Beyond that, as Franz Boas noted in his introduction, Mead's work refuted common misconceptions about traditional societies, that they are wild and unrestrained, that people in them simply act on the impulse of the moment, like small children. The Samoans in fact had complex rules of etiquette regarding questions such as who sits where and who gets to speak in what order, rules as complex as anything you'd find at, say, a state dinner at the White House or Robert's *Rules of Order*. Other cultures weren't simpler or more primitive, they were merely different. These were ideas that had by 1929 permeated into the small community of academic anthropologists, but they were alien to the larger Western culture until Margaret Mead presented them to the world in her book.

And even beyond that, perhaps the biggest bombshell in her book was the very notion that Western culture had something to learn, from Samoans or any other more traditional society. She had demonstrated with a concrete example, that Western culture did not have all the answers, that it still struggled with social problems that other societies had solved.

She received her Ph.D. from Columbia in 1929. The following year, she published *Growing Up in New Guinea*, about her research in the Admiralty Islands, which compared child rearing there and in America. After further field work in New Guinea, she published *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* in 1935. Yes, in 1935 even Margaret Mead called the peoples of New Guinea “primitive.” She made the case that various societies in New Guinea were male-dominated or female-dominated, and some were peaceful and others warlike, but there was no correlation between the dominant gender and the temperament of the society. “Human nature,” she wrote, “is almost unbelievably malleable.”

Neither of these books sold as well as her first book; nothing she wrote for the rest of her life sold as well as her first book. But they did cement her image as the nation’s leading anthropologist in the minds of the American public.

It was on that field trip to New Guinea that Margaret Mead and Reo Fortune met an English anthropologist named Gregory Bateson. They became friendly, particularly Gregory and Margaret, which led to Margaret and Reo separating and eventually divorcing. Margaret Mead would marry Gregory Bateson in 1936. This third marriage would be her most successful. It lasted fourteen years and produced a daughter, her only child, Mary Catherine Bateson, born in 1939, who herself became an anthropologist. She passed away at the beginning of this year, 2021.

In the birth and rearing of her own child, Mary Catherine, Margaret Mead wanted to incorporate her own ideas and the lessons drawn from her anthropological studies. She selected a New York doctor named Benjamin Spock as her pediatrician, because Spock was willing to work cooperatively with her. In particular, Mead wanted to breastfeed her baby and do it on demand, as they did in Polynesia, which was utterly contrary to the prevailing medical wisdom of the time, which held that formula was superior to breast milk, that babies should be fed according to a strict schedule, and if they ever cried for food in between feedings, too bad. Feeding on demand would only spoil the kid.

Seven years later, in 1946, Benjamin Spock would publish his own revolutionary book, titled *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care*, which encouraged parents to trust their own judgment and reassured them that “you know more than you think you do.” But that is a story for another episode.

When the Second World War broke out, Mead published *Keep Your Powder Dry: An Anthropologist Looks at America*, in which she discussed aspects of American culture that she believed would help win the war.

In the 1950s, following her third divorce, Margaret Mead did work for the RAND Corporation analyzing Russian culture as a part of Cold War research for the US government. From 1955 until her death, she lived with and worked with fellow anthropologist Rhoda Metraux, and it is widely believed the two were in a romantic relationship.

Her position at the Museum of Natural History in New York made her easily available to radio and later television, and she was often interviewed for news programs, features, and documentaries on subjects related to anthropology. By the 1960s, she was the most famous woman scientist in the United States; I might be able to say, the most famous scientist, period. She favored capes, carried a distinctive forked walking stick, and was embraced by America as a sort of philosopher-elder or public intellectual, certainly a media figure, she was consulted on just about everything, and she always had an opinion on just about anything. Divorce wasn't such a bad thing, said the thrice-divorced anthropologist; divorce laws should be made more liberal. She was an advocate for the environmental movement. In 1969, she testified before a Senate subcommittee that the criminalization of marijuana was far more dangerous than the weed itself. And of course, the counterculture movement of the 1960s and the Sexual Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s were certainly influenced, if not outright inspired, by *Coming of Age in Samoa*.

She gave frequent lectures before a range of audiences on topics that ran from women in science to city planning, from alcoholism to air pollution, from population control to child development. Whatever the topic, she knew what she was talking about.

In 1971, she co-authored a book with African-American social critic James Baldwin, titled *A Rap on Race*, which explored her research in Polynesia, his experiences as an African American, race, religion, feminism, and just about everything else. She coined the word *semiotics*, but we won't hold that against her.

Margaret Mead died in 1978, at the age of 76. The following year, US President Jimmy Carter awarded her a posthumous Presidential Medal of Freedom. Margaret Mead is also supposed to have said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." It's the quote that launched ten thousand bumper stickers. It's not 100% certain she actually said this, but she probably did. It certainly sounds like her, and she lived her life as if determined to prove it true.

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Suzanne and Antonio for their kind donations, and thank you to RichBot for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Suzanne and Antonio and RichBot help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, just visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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Next week is a bye week for the podcast, but I hope you'll join me in two weeks' time, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we turn from anthropology to chemistry. In the 1920s and 1930s, an engineer named Thomas Midgely developed not one but two new revolutionary chemicals, both of which would be hailed as major scientific breakthroughs by one generation and condemned as environmental disasters by the next. Meet the man with an instinct for the regrettable, in two weeks' time, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. I would be remiss if I did not mention that in 1983, five years after Mead's death, a New Zealand anthropologist named Derek Freeman published a book offering a serious challenge to Margaret Mead's research in Samoa. He claimed that Mead had been duped by teenage girls who were kidding her and that in fact the sexual mores in Samoa were quite strict, and accused Mead of sloppy work and gullibility, and then of building her mistakes into an elaborate argument that more accurately reflected her own ideology than any honest conclusions based on honest research. Freeman continued to write critiques of Mead's work for the rest of his own life. He died in 2001.

The controversy attracted a lot of public attention, and people tend to line up for or against Mead based on their own beliefs. People who endorse a conservative sexual morality and those who lean toward nature in the nature-versus-nurture debate tend to accept Freeman's view, while their ideological opponents tend to support Mead.

It should be noted that Freeman's own motives here are not beyond question. He had a dubious reputation for being difficult to work with and argumentative. While Mead was still alive, Freeman was quoted as calling her a "castrator of men," so we know where he's coming from.

The consensus view among anthropologists is that some of Freeman's criticisms might be accurate, but they are overblown. He's been accused of cherry-picking his own research and misrepresenting Mead and her findings. Showing that one or two of Mead's interview subjects recanted their claims sixty years later doesn't discredit her entire thesis; for one thing, she relied on more than one or two interviews to draw her conclusions. For another thing, when a woman

in her seventies recants claims about her own sexual activities she made in her teens—how shall I say this?—it is not immediately obvious that it must be her youthful testimony that is false.

We shouldn't be surprised if 23-year-old Margaret Mead might have made a few mistakes in her doctoral research. Anthropology was just getting going at the time, and the kind of anthropological research Mead was undertaking—traveling to the far corners of the world and living among and observing people of other cultures over an extended period of time—was a novel approach. There weren't much for agreed-upon standards at the time, and naturally, the standards that have evolved since are a little higher than those Mead met.

And yes, *Coming of Age in Samoa* had its ideological and argumentative elements. It was a popular science book, not her actual dissertation, and she had the right to be ideological. Her publisher in fact asked her to be.

And in the popular mind, her most important contribution was to drive home the point that Western culture is not the be-all and end-all of human accomplishment, a point that I suppose even Derek Freeman would have to agree with, I think. That point, rather than the precise details of Samoan culture, is the reason why we still discuss Margaret Mead's work today, a century later. I'm going to give the last word to Ann McLean, who is Reo Fortune's niece, and who said of Margaret Mead that her accomplishment "consists in her having persuaded the contemporary American and American satellite public to examine critically their actions and attitudes and to contemplate, albeit briefly, that there might be other ways of seeing and doing things that are equally viable."

[music: Closing Theme]