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Murdock, George Peter (11 May 1897-29 Mar. 1985), anthropologist, "totemic ancestor" of cross-cultural research, and university professor, was born near Meriden, Connecticut, the son of George Bronson Murdock and Harriett Elizabeth Graves, farmers. As an adult, Murdock enjoyed telling how his boyhood experience behind an ox-driven plow had prepared him for the study of subsistence techniques in his career in anthropology. He received an A.B. with honors in history from Yale University in 1919, after a tour of duty in World War I as an army first lieutenant in field artillery, and he competed that same year in the national Forest Hills tennis tournament. Admitted to Harvard Law School and influenced by undergraduate courses with sociologist Albert G. Keller, he undertook a year-long trip through Asia and Europe and decided on a more adventurous career in anthropology. When ethnologist [Franz Boas](#) denied him admission at Columbia University because of his "sociological" orientation, Murdock completed the "science of society" Ph.D. program in anthropology and sociology at Yale in 1925. There he acquired his cross-cultural orientation, in a tradition established by [William Graham Sumner](#) and continued by Murdock's graduate adviser, Keller. Murdock's dissertation, a critical translation of Julius Lippert's *The Evolution of Culture*, was published in 1931.

In 1925 Murdock married Carmen Swanson, a Yale graduate student in biochemistry, who became his lifelong companion and scientific reader/critic; they had one child. After a brief teaching job at the University of Maryland, he returned as an assistant professor to Keller's department at Yale in 1928, where he taught until 1960, reaching emeritus status. He helped [Edward Sapir](#) found the anthropology department in 1931 and served as its chair from 1937 to 1943 and from 1953 to 1957.

Murdock undertook field work among the Haida in 1932 and among the Tenino in the summers of 1934 and 1935, reconstructing their traditional cultures. His first major comparative ethnographic publication, which set the tone for later work, was *Our Primitive Contemporaries* (1934). Instrumental in shaping his work were the interdisciplinary human behavior orientations of Yale's Institute of Human Relations. There he joined psychologists [Clark L. Hull](#) and Neal Miller, sociologist [John Dollard](#), Freudian psychoanalysts, and others, and cofounded in 1937 the Cross-Cultural Survey that systematized the Sumner-Keller comparative tradition by using E. B. Tylor's and Murdock's own comparative work as a model. Murdock broke with Keller's evolutionism but kept the conviction that a science of society required systematic comparative study. He helped to introduce sampling procedures and statistical testing. In 1937 he published newly coded data on the sexual division of labor and the first demonstrations of the synthesis of a new cross-cultural approach. He also organized the survey's regional bibliographies and classifications of ethnographic materials, both by regional similarities and by subject matter, as in his *Outline of Cultural Materials* (1938). There followed a spate of articles such as his "Cross-Cultural Survey" and "Double Descent" (1940). Although interrupted by the start of World War II, he and his colleagues had established the basis for the organization in 1946 of the Human Relations Area Files and for the

emergence of disciplinary interest in cross-cultural studies that followed. In February 1943 he arranged for the Cross-Cultural Survey on Micronesia to be taken over by the navy, where he was a reserve officer.

Commissioned in April 1943 a lieutenant commander in the Naval Office of Occupied Areas (research unit for the islands of Micronesia), Murdock and junior officers Clellan S. Ford and John W. M. Whiting, whom he had enlisted, prepared a series of handbooks on the Marshall, Caroline, Marianas, Izu, Bonin, and Ryukyu islands. Murdock's influence in promoting the relevance of social science research in the wartime and postwar contexts gave rise to navy proposals of annexation of Micronesian Trust Territories as the alternative to postwar administration by the United Nations with the goal of granting them early independence. These proposals and Murdock's overall Pacific research plans, while initially opposed at the time by members of the Pacific Science Association with a more Boasian (culture-historical) and less utilitarian approach to anthropology, were the source of compromises in 1946 both in terms of research priorities and policy settlement of Micronesian trusteeships. The navy named Murdock field director of the 1947-1948 Coordinated Investigation of Micronesian Anthropology, which employed forty-two anthropologists from twenty institutions. He himself worked in 1947-1948 with five Yale anthropologists and linguists on Truk in the Carolines, publishing with Ward H. Goodenough his first study of a fully functioning non-Western culture, "Social Organization of Truk." He helped to found and was president in 1947 of the Society for Applied Anthropology and received the Viking Medal in 1949. In 1951 he helped Alexander Spoehr reorganize the Bishop Museum in Honolulu; they founded with Yale and the University of Hawaii the Tri-Institutional Pacific Program that funded more than twenty field projects over ten years. He and Harold Coolidge organized the Pacific Science Board of the National Research Council, of which Murdock became a member and chairman (1953-1957), helping to further research in the region for decades and to include anthropologists through the 1950s on the administrative staffs of the Trust Territories. He was elected president of the American Ethnological Society in 1952 and of the American Anthropological Association in 1955.

Murdock's chief interests were in social organization and the regulation of sexual behavior. Among his many publications were comparative articles on "Bifurcate Merging" and "Family Universals" in 1947, "North American Indian Social Organization" (1955), and "Cultural Correlates of the Regulation of Premarital Sexual Behavior" (1964). His landmark work, *Social Structure* (1949), brought conceptual clarity to the study of family and kinship organization by testing an integrated set of human behavioral principles against the cultural variation found in a sample of 250 societies that he coded on features of kinship organization. The book stimulated recognition of new problems, such as cognatic descent groups, that Murdock explored with others, as in his 1960 edited volume, *Social Structure in Southeast Asia*, and classic articles on "Cognatic Forms of Social Organization" (1960) and "The Kindred" (1964). His ethnographic reading was prodigious, and he demanded that students master the regional ethnographies of their chosen areas of study. His highly influential comparative study, *Africa: Its Peoples and Their Culture History* (1959), embodied his teaching principles concerning regional cultures. *Explorations in Cultural Anthropology* (1964), a festschrift edited by

Goodenough, shows the range of scholarly and scientific problems undertaken by his students.

Although in 1960 he faced the pleasant prospect of emeritus status at Yale, Murdock accepted instead an offer from University of Pittsburgh dean of social sciences John P. Gillin to become a Mellon Professor. At Pittsburgh, Murdock launched a new anthropology department and, with the backing of the university, founded the journal *Ethnology* as an outlet for descriptive ethnographic articles and cross-cultural studies as well as for the issue of his *Ethnographic Atlas* (1967, also published by installments) of coded comparative ethnographic data. In 1964 he was elected to the National Academy of Sciences; he received the Herbert E. Gregory Medal in Tokyo in 1966 and the Wilbur Lucius Cross Medal in 1967. Reprints of his essays appeared in 1965 as *Culture and Society*. Between 1964 and 1968 he was called on to help organize the Division of Behavioral Sciences of the National Research Council. By 1970 his atlas had grown to include 1,270 cases coded from his ethnographic readings. He and Douglas R. White selected and annotated 186 cross-culturally representative societies from Murdock's database to establish a Standard Cross-Cultural Sample (1969) for the comparative research community. With funding from the National Science Foundation, they planned and codirected Pittsburgh's Cross-Cultural Cumulative Coding Center, which hired and supervised coders to compile and publish, mostly with Murdock's coauthorship, systematic data sets on the standard sample. Murdock continued to publish extensively on methodology in cross-cultural studies. The cases in his atlas were further culled in the *Atlas of World Cultures* (1981), a unique tool for cross-cultural studies. The cumulative "Focused Ethnographic Bibliography for the Standard Cross-Cultural Sample" was published in *Behavior Science Research* (23 [1988]: 1-145).

Murdock received the Huxley Memorial Medal in London in 1971. His Huxley lecture on "Anthropology's Mythology" (*Proceedings 1971* [1972]: 17-24), debunked "culture" and "social system" as grand explanations for human behavior. He argued instead for rebuilding a behavioral approach to anthropology in terms of operational concepts. In 1976 Marshall Sahlins's *Culture and Practical Reason* described two of the main paradigms of anthropological theory and identified Murdock with "praxis theories" of individual behaviors, interacting to shape culture, as opposed to "culturological theories." He described Murdock as anthropology's Robespierre for announcing the "demise" of culture as an explanatory concept in its own right.

Following retirement in 1973, Murdock resettled outside Philadelphia to be near his son's family and his former student Goodenough. His penultimate and last substantive book, *Theories of Illness: A World Survey* (1980), showed a comparative behavioral approach to supernatural projections that was still creatively evolving even in his eighty-third year. He died at home in Devon, Pennsylvania.

Murdock's detractors viewed his cross-cultural approach as too mechanical and connected with a classification system that now appears outdated and an artifact of Western civilization. His regional comparative studies, however, and the work of his later years, starting with the Standard Cross-Cultural Sample, was concerned with reintegrating a

more Boasian culture-historical approach into comparative studies. While his descriptive comparative categories allowed theories of his day to be tested, he encouraged novel approaches and developments in cross-cultural research that would supercede his own.

Murdock's long career spanned both the coming of age of American anthropology and the emergence of controversial divisions over the nature of anthropology's subject matter. Many of Murdock's contributions enter into late twentieth-century debates in anthropology and methodology, and his cross-cultural samples and databases (also republished in *World Cultures* electronic journal, vols. 1, 2, and 4) continue in wide use, even if they are much reworked and reinterpreted through later analyses. The Standard Cross-Cultural Sample has been used in hundreds of published cross-cultural studies (such as those cited in *Behavior Science Research* 25 [1991]: 79-140), each of which also contributes to a cumulative cross-cultural database. Debates that his comparative studies stimulated, especially over "etic" concepts used in description or comparison versus "emic" concepts of specific cultures, continue alongside efforts to contextualize cross-cultural materials through the networks of observed behaviors and historical linkages that connect the elements of cultural systems.

A modest but feisty man, whom Cambridge anthropologist Edmund Leach dubbed "Six-gun Pete," Murdock abhorred pomposity in any form and was continually open to new ideas and projects. Goodenough wrote that Murdock "did not see anthropology as an arena in which people competed for recognition and status or in which the object was to impose some ideological version of truth on the treatment of its subject matter. He saw it, rather, as a cooperative undertaking toward improving our understanding of what goes on in the human world and the processes that give it shape." In the fifty years between his first publication in 1931 and his last in 1981, Murdock played both controversial and leading roles in anthropology's growth and development.

Bibliography

The journal *Ethnology* 24 (1985): 307-17, published Alexander Spoehr's review of Murdock's contributions and his complete bibliography. The *American Anthropologist* 88 (1986): 682-86, carried an assessment of his life's work by John W. M. Whiting. *Behavior Science Research* 22 (1988): 1-9, a special issue devoted to a retrospective assessment of Murdock, included a review of his contributions by Ward H. Goodenough and separate reviews of his contributions to the Human Relations Area Files, the *Ethnographic Atlas*, and the study of North American Indians, Africa, and kinship and social structure. John A. Barnes's *Three Styles in the Study of Kinship* (1971) reviews Murdock's approach in contrast to others.

Douglas R. White