US anthropologist who established the practice of fieldwork in anthropology and - with her account of adolescence in Samoa - popularized the idea within her own country that there arealternatives to the American way of life. She was also one of the first anthropologists to study childrearing. The accuracy of her early observations was later called into question. She used the media to air her views on civil liberties, ecology, feminism, child psychology, education and social issues, and became one of the best known media personalities of her generation.

Mead was born in Philadelphia, the eldest of five children. Her father was a professor of finance and her mother a teacher and sociologist who was also a suffragist. Mead had a happy childhood and was mostly educated at home by her grandmother who was also a teacher. In the 1920s she studied anthropology under German-born US anthropologist Franz Boas (1858-1942) at Barnard College. From him she learnt the rigour of studying whole cultures in comprehensive detail which is reflected in her early work. It was at this time that she met Boas’s research assistant, Ruth Benedict, who was to become a lifelong friend.

Graduating from Barnard in 1923, Mead married Luther Cresswell, though the marriage was short-lived. She completed an MA in psychology at Columbia in 1924 and in 1925, encouraged by Boas, won a National Research Council Fellowship that enabled her to make her first trip to Samoa to study the lives of adolescent girls in that culture. On this experience she based her book *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928), which questioned the Western assumption that the transition to adulthood is necessarily stressful. It was on her return trip that she met New Zealand anthropologist, Reo Fortune, whom she married on board ship in 1928 on her way to visit the Manus tribe in the Admiralty Islands, New Guinea, on her next research fellowship. This trip resulted in *Growing up in New Guinea* (1930) another best-seller. In 1935 she married English biologist and anthropologist Gregory Bateson (1904-1980) whom she had met in New Guinea. They had a daughter, Mary, in 1939, but divorced in 1945.

Mead was curator of Pacific Ethnology at the American Museum of Natural History from 1926 and became the director of the Columbia University Research in Contemporary Cultures in 1948 after Ruth Benedict’s death. In 1954 she became an adjunct professor at Columbia and in 1965 became Curator Emeritus of Ethnology at the museum. Mead was one of the first anthropologists to exploit film and photography and worked with Gregory Bateson to publish *Balinese Character* (1942). She wrote over 40 books, most of which challenged received ideas on the American way of life. *Male and Female* (1949) for example, queries the idea that differences between the sexes are biologically, rather than socially, determined, and opened the way for the nature-nurture debate. She and Ruth Benedict also challenged the American ‘melting pot’ theory of culture, according to which homogenized childrearing and education would dissolve cultural differences and allow people of all races to get on. They, on the other hand, argued for the differences to be respected rather than obliterated. In the 1950s and 1960s
Mead turned her attention to the generation gap, publishing *Culture and Commitment* in 1970. She appeared on television talk shows and she also lectured on child psychology and education at a number of universities and wrote many scholarly monographs and papers, as well as columns for magazines. *Coming of Age* was probably the best-selling anthropological book of all time, and had an eye-opening effect on Western and particularly US society that cannot be gainsaid by the criticism made of Mead's methods in particular that of Derek Freeman in *Margaret Mead and Samoa* (1983). Freeman claimed that Mead's work was based on 'colossal errors' and that his research showed the Samoans as an intensely competitive people with high murder and rape rates and an intolerance of premarital sex, all of which contrasted strongly with Mead's island paradise of free love and no adolescent angst. Notwithstanding this, Mead's conclusions had had a profound effect on anthropological theory and on the beliefs of millions of people.

Margaret Mead was the recipient of numerous awards and honorary degrees - she was President of the American Anthropological Association, the Society for Applied Anthropology and the World Federation for Mental Health. She often returned to New Guinea in the 1970s and she opened an exhibition hall at the museum there. Her later books include the autobiographical *Blackberry Winter: My Earlier Years* (1972) and *Letters from the Field 1925-1975* (1977). When she died of cancer on 17 November 1978 she was mourned worldwide.
APA

Chicago

Harvard

MLA