

LUCY PHILIP MAIR, 1901–86

John Middleton

Lucy Philip Mair was born in London in 1901 and died in London on 1 April 1986. She was a social anthropologist of international reputation and known particularly for her work on Africa.

She was educated at St Paul's Girls' School and at Newnham College, Cambridge, where she took a degree in classics. She worked with Gilbert Murray for the League of Nations Union until 1927, when she went to the London School of Economics as a member of the Department of International Relations. She was to be associated with LSE for the remainder of her life. She became a member of the historically famous seminar run by Bronislaw Malinowski, a seminar that produced most of the British-trained Africanist anthropologists of the 1930s. For her doctorate she did field research among the BaGanda people of Uganda, and in 1934 published her findings as *An African People in the Twentieth Century*, a title that presaged her later concern with problems of change and development. She herself later thought it an inadequate book, an opinion typical of her modesty, but when compared to other monographs of the same period it is in fact a competent and instructive field study.

In 1932 she became Lecturer in Colonial Administration at LSE. The war years were spent at the Royal Institute for International Affairs, and in 1945 she went to Australia to advise on the Australian administration of New Guinea (leading to her book *Australia in New Guinea*, 1948). In 1947 she became Reader in Colonial Administration, a title later changed to Reader in Applied Anthropology; in 1963 she was given the Chair in Applied Anthropology, and retired in 1968. After a brief spell at the University of Durham she moved to the University of Kent where she spent several very happy years as a part-time member of the Department of Anthropology. At heart, however, she was always deeply and fiercely attached to the LSE, the faintest criticism of which would lead to a furious response.

Throughout the post-war period she published many books and articles on the problems and processes of development, and it is on these that her reputation stands. She was in her own mind first and foremost a social anthropologist, seeing her discipline at the forefront of understanding the actual historical processes of social change. She never accepted the simplistic models of many economists and others who conceived of societies as though machines, and stressed that it is the culturally determined aims, wishes, knowledge and ignorance of the members of the societies undergoing change that are the factors that make for or inhibit development. She saw this without sentimentality, but with a clear eye for the historical and sociological facts rather than with wishful thinking or a purely mechanistic view of the working of societies. Perhaps her best-known work in this field was on land tenure and local political organisation, which she rightly saw as factors which must be understood in detail before plans and programmes for change stand any hope of success. But her

interests were also much wider and she saw clearly the importance of the relationships between local change and the growth of modern nation states and also the significance of the relations between these states and those of the 'developed' world that wished to retain some form of hegemony over their former wards. Her earlier works show this concern: *The Protection of Minorities* (1928), *Native Policies in Africa* (1936) and *Welfare in the British Colonies* (1944) all deal with aspects of these political and moral problems. And *New Nations* (1963) is a superb overview of these global relations, in which she set out clearly and honestly her views, whether popular or not, about the historical process of post-colonial independence.

She was also a writer of valuable and influential works on more conventional anthropological topics (although she never made that distinction herself). She saw the need for works that would bring together the detailed and scattered findings of ethnographers to provide comparative studies of forms of social organisation. The most important of these were *Primitive Government* (1962), which in fact deals mainly with Eastern and Central Africa, and *An Introduction to Social Anthropology* (1965), a clearly and concisely argued account based on her own strongly held views as to what she and her students should be doing. *Witchcraft* (1969) and *Marriage* (1971) were later works of summarisation, useful but not as original. Finally, seeing the great need for Africanist materials in teaching undergraduates and a wider public, she compiled two collections, one, *African Societies* (1974), a set of 'potted' ethnographies, and the other, *African Kingdoms* (1977), more deliberately comparative and theoretical. Throughout her career Lucy Mair was a prolific writer of book reviews: she was the review editor's dream, invariably producing a review of the right level of discussion, the right length and by the right time. It is typical of her own sense of modesty that she kept no list or copies of these reviews, although they are models of criticism, honest and without regard for the academic or other standing of the authors of the books she was writing about. A characteristic of everything that she wrote was a simplicity and clarity of style. She had no patience with jargon and laboured qualifications, which in her opinion merely showed a lack of understanding of basic principles and often too great a sense of an author's self-importance; she wrote straightforwardly because she herself could master a complex argument and then present it to others, and she expected other scholars to do no less.

Lucy Mair was associated with the IAI for many years as Fellow and for several periods as member of its Council. She represented there a unique expertise, based on her own researches and moral concerns, her astonishingly wide reading, and her close knowledge of social anthropology. She was a person of total intellectual honesty and common sense, never seduced by the merely fashionable. She had a reputation among many people of being hypercritical of others (as indeed she could be of those whom she considered to be intellectually superficial or idle, although never of those who merely held views different from her own), and of often being rude or brusque (sometimes so, but usually as expression of her own very real shyness). She was a person of great knowledge and love of music, art and theatre, always interested in the world immediately around her, which

she observed with a sharp sense of its comedy, and at times disconcertingly 'modern' in both her tastes and her political views. To those fortunate enough to be allowed to know her and to show their affection and respect for her as a person, she gave unassuming kindness and generosity and a total personal loyalty.

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