

## JOHN FEE EMBREE, 1908–1950.

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JOHN EMBREE had less than two decades in which to work. Yet within that time he gained both some public name and the lasting regard of his fellow professionals. One of the most competent contemporary observers of social life and of the Far East, he was also one of the most versatile. He bridged anthropology and Far Eastern studies; at the time of his death he was a specialist on two areas of Asia; and as an anthropologist he was both scholar and actor in public affairs. The historians of his fields will no doubt remember him primarily for these accomplishments. His contemporaries, however, will recall him as readily for his personal attainments. Of sensitive moral fibre, he was by character and conviction animated by an extraordinary and classic sense of pity. This quality of course won him the respect and admiration of his colleagues. It also opened to him the hearts of those less fortunate than himself, and of the people among whom he worked. In the post-war years he was still remembered with neighborly affection and with pride as in a native son by the people of Suye Mura. In southeast Asia, though his situation was often less conducive to easy personal relationships, he acquired by his deep sympathy a host of devoted friends.

John Fee Embree was born in New Haven, Connecticut on August 26, 1908, the son of Kate Scott Clark and the late Edwin R. Embree. Family tradition and early experience foreshadowed several elements distinctive of his own maturity. For one thing they set him in an atmosphere seldom far removed from the academic. A descendent of the founder of Berea College, his father held a variety of posts of responsibility at Yale, and with the Rockefeller, Rosenwald, and Liberian foundations. John Embree's interest in anthropology and the Far East, too, was preceded and paralleled by that of his father, a lifelong student of ethnic and cultural contact, one of those instrumental in the establishment of Peking Medical Center, and, over a quarter of a century, an interpreter of the peoples of Asia and the Pacific. The family also provided something other than intellectual and career prototypes. John Embree was the descendent of Southern abolitionists, who showed their conviction of equality for Negro and white through open public service and their daily lives. His father's career was devoted to the physical and spiritual welfare of the underprivileged. John Embree was thus heir of a distinguished moral tradition which he, in his own way, followed and developed.

In 1931 John Embree took his A.B. at the University of Hawaii. In the succeeding year he married Ella Lury, to whose intellectual and emotional aid he was to owe a great deal. Undecided as to a career at graduation, he was fleetingly interested in creative writing, but soon fixed upon professional anthropology and went as a graduate student to the University of Toronto, receiving his M.A. there in 1934.

The next three years, which he spent as a graduate student and research assistant at the University of Chicago, proved to be important ones. A part of this period passed in residence at the University, where he came under the influence especially of A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, the British anthropologist, to whom can be traced much of his interest in, and thinking about, social organization. Over a year of this period was spent in Japan, in the field work out of which came the book *Suye Mura* and a good part of the basic knowledge of Japan he later showed.

The war brought *Suye Mura* a non-professional recognition far beyond that enjoyed by almost any other comparable ethnography or work on the Far East. It stands up equally well for the author's colleagues, Western and Japanese. It is pleasant to report that even in 1940, Professor Suzuki Eitarō, in the circumstantial and responsible review that introduced the book to Japanese anthropologists, rated *Suye Mura's* qualities with the best that Japanese social scientists had themselves yet shown in publication.<sup>1</sup> As a faithful, ordered, and comprehensive guide to the anatomy of a village's social life, the book is still the most useful report in a Western language, and a distinct contribution alike to world ethnography and to scholarly Japanese literature. It is perhaps less frequently remarked that John Embree's work in Japan made a contribution of method, as well as of content. He showed it to be possible for the Western scholar, unequipped with the elaborate training of the orientalist and relying mainly upon the tools of any good social scientist, to do work significant for both. In this sense he helped greatly to open up the opportunities for research on Asia that we will increasingly exploit.

After receiving his Ph.D. at Chicago in 1937 John Embree began a career that was to be as varied as that of most of his perforce restless age-mates. He was a teacher intermittently from the year of his doctorate to his death. From 1937 to 1941 at Hawaii, he moved in the latter year to Toronto, where he stayed only until entering government service in 1942. After the war he returned to Hawaii. In 1948 he went to Yale, where he was until his death Associate Professor of Sociology and a participant (later Director) in the Southeast Asia Area Studies Program.

<sup>1</sup> Suzuki Eitarō, "Shakai-jinruigaku-jō no kenkyū to shite no Embree-shi no 'Suye mura' to Nihon nōson shakaigaku" (Japanese Rural Sociology and Embree's 'Suye Mura,' a Study in Social Anthropology), *Minzokugaku kenkyū* (The Japanese Journal of Ethnology) 6, 3 (July-September 1940) 353-373.

John Embree was also a tireless researcher, and especially field-worker. None of the major periods of his career went by without some attention to research, and his work was moreover translated readily into publications. During the pre-war years at Hawaii he studied changes in the culture of Japanese immigrants. During the war he was instrumental in setting up a program for the running social analysis of the communities of Japanese-Americans established by the War Relocation Authority. Later he carried out several pieces of wartime work, including one on military government in the Pacific. In 1947 he resigned his post at the University of Hawaii in order to become acquainted with Southeast Asia at first hand. At the time of his death he was energetically planning an urban community study in that area. This sort of work suited his abilities, convictions, and temperament. He was a craftsmanlike researcher, and believed strongly in the value of empirical study. He derived a deep pleasure moreover from being with peoples of different race and culture. And his understanding, and indeed love, for them awakened an answer on their part that made them readily expose their life to him.

A third aspect of John Embree's career was his work in that field of human engineering known currently as Applied Anthropology. Here he was at once student of the problems of application, actor, and vigilant critic. During the war years his special knowledge of Japan was in great demand, but his work involved as much the use of his general anthropological skills, which he turned to account in a great variety of tasks. Several of these were for research, while others—for example, direction of Japanese Area studies in the Civil Affairs Training School at the University of Chicago—were for administration or teaching, and also productive. In Bangkok and Saigon after the war he tried to assist the contacts of Americans and southeast Asiatics as a State Department Cultural Affairs officer. In addition, until his death he served as consultant to many undertakings. The manifest aim of Applied Anthropology in cultural contact situations—to make for smooth relations, successful administration, the transmission of essentials, etc., while guarding the human rights and as much as can be of the cultural heritage of the participants—undoubtedly made a powerful appeal to him. Yet by its nature it is a mission that tries all but the very tough-minded, and it brought anguish to him, as to many another of his colleagues. He set high standards for himself. His wartime writings on the Japanese, for example, contain much that is a model of wartime dispassion, and his prognosis for the development of a democratic society in Japan under a military occupation kept him aloof from this experiment. He found much distasteful or that he thought wrong in the acts of both the agencies of power and his coworkers. His colleagues have often disagreed with his analyses and expressed or implied action conclusions, but his concern and courage were unquestioned, and the problems he raised usually fundamental.

John Embree's best work has been deeply productive for his contemporaries. His restless curiosity and his belief that his work should be both faithful to fact and of service to ethical ends are in the main tradition of his fields. It is with a deep sense of loss that we have to record his early death.

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<sup>2</sup> This bibliography was prepared, substantially in the form in which it appears here, by Anna Pickelis, Yale University.

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