

JOHN FEE EMBREE, 1908-1950

By FRED EGGAN

JOHN EMBREE, with his daughter Clare, was struck down by an automobile and instantly killed in Hamden, Connecticut, on Friday afternoon, December 22, 1950. That day the anthropological profession lost a colleague it could ill afford to lose. After a varied career in research, teaching, and government service, he had recently assumed the directorship of Southeast Asia Studies at Yale University, following the death of Raymond Kennedy, and was beginning to make important contributions toward the solution of the major scientific and historical problems of that area.

The son of the late Edwin R. Embree and Kate Scott Embree, John was born in New Haven on August 26, 1908. An earlier contact with the machine age occurred at the age of eleven when he was knocked off his bicycle by a truck and spent two years on crutches recovering from a severe fracture. Later while he was attending the Lincoln School in New York, his parents took him on a trip to Japan and China. From there he continued on around the world alone and his youthful experiences with the various peoples and cultures of Southeast Asia were an important factor in his later decision to go into anthropology.

He started college at McGill University but soon transferred to the University of Hawaii where he took a B.A. degree. During this period he was interested in writing and published several romantic essays in *Paradise of the Pacific* and the *Honolulu Mercury*. His plan to take advanced work in English at Columbia University was interrupted by another trip to Japan which aroused his latent interest in the Far East. His marriage to Ella Lury, who had grown up in Japan, crystallized his decision to become an anthropologist and study Japanese culture. He took his M.A. in anthropology at the University of Toronto and then went to the University of Chicago on a fellowship. Here he came under the influence of Professor Radcliffe-Brown who soon arranged for the Embrees to spend a year and a half in Japan making a social anthro-



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pological study of a Japanese community. *Suye Mura*, which resulted, became immediately an anthropological classic and is still the best study of a Japanese village extant.

After receiving his Ph.D. at Chicago in 1937, Embree returned to the University of Hawaii as an assistant professor and studied acculturation among the Japanese of the Kona Valley. By 1941 he became restless in the isolation of Honolulu and accepted an offer from the University of Toronto. With Pearl Harbor his knowledge of Japan and the Japanese made him a key figure and he served his country in several capacities. He aided in the preparation of the pocket guides for the Office of Strategic Services, then helped improve the administration of the Japanese relocation centers as principal community analyst for the War Relocation Authority. But his major contribution was made as associate professor of anthropology and head of the Japanese area studies of the Civil Affairs Training School for the Far East which the War Department set up at the University of Chicago during 1943-45 for the training of military government officers for Japan and the Occupied Areas. Here he had the task of organizing the basic curriculum for area instruction, which was later extended to several universities, and of instructing army and navy officers in the complexities of Japanese society, culture, and character. He has written of this period,¹ but I would like to add the observation that not once during these years did he compromise with anthropological standards. Officers returning from the Occupation of Japan have remarked on the usefulness of the training which he gave them in meeting the practical problems which they had to face.

The war period was one of extensive publication as well, much of it oriented toward the needs of Civil Affairs instruction. *The Japanese*, one of the War Background Studies of the Smithsonian Institution, was expanded into *The Japanese Nation, A Social Survey*, but he was never particularly satisfied with the results. During this period Ella Embree participated in the planning, instruction, and writing, as she had in the Japanese research.

After the Civil Affairs Training School program was finished, Embree served briefly as consultant for the Foreign Economic Administration and then as psychological warfare supervisor for the Office of War Information in the Pacific Area. With the end of the war he returned briefly to the University of Hawaii, but soon joined the State Department as Cultural Attaché in Bangkok and Saigon, to help develop their program of cultural relations. When that program was reduced in scope he returned to America and joined the new Southeast Asia Studies program at Yale University, as associate professor of Sociology. In July 1950, he was made Director of Southeast Asia Studies and re-

¹ See "American Military Government," in *Social Structure, Studies Presented to A. R. Radcliffe-Brown*, edited by M. Fortes, Oxford, 1949.

search associate in anthropology. At Yale he began to lay the foundations for a long-term program of research by preparing a comprehensive bibliography and gazetteer of the region. His published papers on Southeast Asia are brief but in his "Thailand—A Loosely Structured Social System" (*AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGIST*, Vol. 52, No. 2, 1950) we can see the beginnings of a comparative analysis of social structure of great promise.

Embree's interest in applied anthropology and the administration of dependent peoples was always considerable, and he had unusual opportunities to observe instances at first hand. He wrote extensively on Japanese relocation, military government, and Indian Service administration, always emphasizing the importance of understanding the values and attitudes of the peoples concerned. During recent years he has been concerned with the UNESCO program for cultural exchange and in 1950 was sent to Liberia to negotiate an agreement between Liberia and UNESCO for technical assistance. As consultant for ECA for Southeast Asia he prepared a memorandum on "Cultural Cautions for U. S. Personnel Going to Southeast Asia," in the Foreword of which he says:

In going to a country of Southeast Asia, one goes from a Western to an Asian culture. The differences one meets are not only differences in language and living standards, but in etiquette, customs, religion, and a whole way of life. It is just as important to consider these differences in undertaking an economic aid program as it is for an agronomist to consider the type of soil he is going to work with in an agricultural improvement program.

Just before his death he had been selected by the Executive Board of the American Anthropological Association as Editor of the Handbook for the Point-Four Program which the Association is preparing under contract with the government. Here his experience and knowledge will be particularly missed by his anthropological colleagues.

This is not the place to assess the contributions of John Embree as a scholar, but it may be stated that he was an anthropologist, first, last and always. He was an effective teacher and was at his best in the give-and-take of discussion. I particularly remember his summation of the Harris Foundation program at Chicago on "South Asia in the World Today" where he demonstrated an ability to synthesize several days of discussion in brilliant fashion, at the same time adding his own not inconsiderable contribution. His sympathies were always with the peoples of that region in their struggles against colonialism and imperialism but he always was concerned with the scientific problems as well.

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