



IN MEMORIAM

George M. Foster Jr.
Professor of Anthropology, Emeritus
Berkeley
1913 – 2006

Born in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, on October 9, 1913, George M. Foster Jr. died on May 18, 2006, at his home in the hills above the campus of the University of California, Berkeley, where he was a professor emeritus for more years than he was an active member of the faculty. His contributions to anthropological theory and practice still challenge us; in more than 300 publications, his writings encompass a wide diversity of topics, including acculturation, long- term fieldwork, peasant economies, pottery making, public health, social structure, symbolic systems, technological change, theories of illness and wellness, humoral medicine in Latin America, and worldview. The quantity, quality, and long- term value of his scholarly work is extraordinary; virtually all of his major publications have been reprinted and/ or translated.

George Foster grew up in an affluent family in Ottumwa, Iowa, where his father was an executive in the meat packing industry. Expecting to follow a career in engineering, Foster entered Harvard College in 1931. After a year, he transferred to Northwestern University, where he eventually had the good luck to enroll in an introductory anthropology class taught by Melville Herskovits. His future life partner, Mary (“Mickie”) LeCron, was also a student in this course. Foster often said, “I found my wife and my profession in the same class.”

Foster arrived in Berkeley in mid- August 1935 to begin his graduate studies, under the tutelage of Alfred Kroeber and Robert Lowie. After he completed his Ph.D. examinations, the Fosters went to Soteapan, Veracruz, where his dissertation research focused on the Sierra Popoluca economy, a theme to which he would return in many of his later studies on peasant communities. With academic posts in anthropology scarce, Foster was lucky to land a job as an instructor in sociology at Syracuse University for the 1941– 42 academic year. He re- crossed the country to take a lecturer position at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), for 1942– 43. Soon after the UCLA job ended, he became the first anthropologist hired to work in Latin America as a representative of the new Institute of Social Anthropology, created within the Smithsonian Institution. Based in Mexico City, where he taught at the Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia (ENAH), he also carried out fieldwork in the town of Tzintzuntzan, Michoacán, where he continued anthropological research for more than a half century.

In 1949– 50, with a Guggenheim Fellowship, Foster traveled to Spain to carry out what proved to be one of the last major anthropological studies within the acculturation framework. This field research led to the publication in 1960 of *Culture and Conquest: Latin America’s Spanish Legacy*, where Foster developed the important concepts of “conquest culture” and “cultural crystallization.” This book received two Spanish translations, the most recent in 2003. Concepts developed in that volume served as a precursor to later work in medical anthropology, especially to publication of *Hippocrates’ Latin American Legacy: Humoral Medicine in the New World* (1994). After a decade of serving in government agencies, Foster made the decision that, at age 39, he should return to a university position, or abandon any hope of becoming a professor. Laying aside

inquiries from other universities, Foster and his family traveled back to Berkeley, where he replaced E. W. Gifford, retiring director of the anthropology museum. Foster received a full-time tenured appointment in the Department of Anthropology in 1955; he served as chair of the department from 1958 to 1961 and then again from 1973 to 1974. In 1958, Foster returned to Tzintzuntzan with a large grant from the National Science Foundation. This research resulted in many important contributions to understanding peasant life. In all, Foster showed great insight into how peasants think and how they survive in difficult times and in states that are often hostile toward them. Foster's analyses of the "dyadic contract," "the image of limited good," and "cultural responses to envy" have illuminated the social mechanisms and psychological defenses people use to adapt to conditions of chronic scarcity. Foster's once controversial and deeply contested concept of "limited good" has found new salience in the work of political and cultural ecologists concerned about scarcity in the areas of natural and human resources. Like all truly creative thinkers, Foster was a few generations ahead of his time.

Foster was a dogged field-worker, ever willing to put in the time necessary to reach defensible conclusions. He developed the concept and norms guiding longterm — even lifelong — fieldwork in key sites. He wrote (1979): "As time passed, I also realized that the original Tzintzuntzan research barely scratched the surface of the cultural reality and that in all areas of life there was still much to be learned."

Foster was a formidable teacher and exacting mentor. He trained countless social and medical anthropologists, many of whom became leaders in their respective fields. He was one of the rare professional anthropologists who took graduate students to the field with him, directly involving them in his own Mexican fieldwork and thereby stimulating valuable trans-generational ethnographic studies and restudies.

A great believer in luck and serendipity, Foster often recognized new opportunities where others saw nothing but shadows. This was especially true in his work in developing the field of medical anthropology. Upon learning about federal interest in training medically oriented behavioral scientists, Foster promptly submitted an ambitious grant proposal to the NIGMS (National Institute for General Medical Sciences), not a standard source for anthropological funding. Over a period of 15 years, from 1965 to 1979, the grant brought in some \$3,000,000 (equivalent to more than \$15,000,000 in 2006 dollars) to support about 100 students in the Berkeley doctoral program. Eager to institutionalize training in medical anthropology, Foster established and directed the joint Berkeley- UCSF (University of California, San Francisco) Ph.D. program from 1972 until his retirement in 1979. Although the doctoral program he founded remains the only separate Ph.D. program in medical anthropology in the world, many postgraduate programs specializing in medical anthropology (such as at Harvard University) were modeled after the Berkeley- San Francisco program. With Barbara Gallatin Anderson, Foster coauthored the first textbook in the field (1978).

Although trained by Kroeber and Lowie to despise applied anthropology, Foster's extensive experience in the Institute of Social Anthropology and with other government assignments led him to recognize the importance of understanding how traditional cultures respond to technological change. Between 1951 and 1983, Foster accepted 36 international consulting assignments related to public health and community health. Through his travels to Latin America, Africa, Asia, and Europe, Foster came to appreciate the importance of the "interaction setting" between "innovating organizations" and "target groups" in determining the success or failure of development projects. His consulting experiences informed his best-selling volume, *Traditional Cultures and the Impact of Technological Change* (1962; reissued as *Traditional Societies and Technological Change*, 1973), as well as *Applied Anthropology* (1969), the first textbook in the field.

During his long career, Foster's accomplishments were recognized with many honors and awards. Upon his retirement in 1979, Foster received the Berkeley Citation. He was elected to the National Academy of Sciences and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, served as president of the American Anthropological Association during the turbulent Vietnam years of 1969-1970, and was recognized with the association's Distinguished Service Award (1980). He received the Malinowski Award from the Society for Applied Anthropology in 1982 and an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters degree from Southern Methodist University in 1990. In 1997, the Berkeley Anthropology Library was renamed in honor of the Fosters. Finally, in 2005, Foster was awarded the Society for Medical Anthropology's first Lifetime Achievement Award (renamed in his honor in 2006).

George M. Foster was preceded in death by his wife, Mary ("Mickie") LeCron Foster, who died in 2001. He is survived by his son, Jeremy Foster of Basalt, Colorado; a daughter, Melissa Bowerman, who lives in the Netherlands; daughter-in-law Angela Foster; son-in-law Wijbrandt van Schurr; five grandchildren; and four great-grandchildren. He also leaves behind two generations of students and colleagues, and generations yet to

come whose lives will be enriched through his vision and generosity.

Stanley H. Brandes
Nancy Scheper- Hughes