



**MATTHEW WILLIAMS STIRLING**  
1896-1975

Matthew W. Stirling, former Director of the Bureau of American Ethnology, died of cancer at his home in Washington, D.C., on 23 January 1975. He retired as Director of the B.A.E. in 1958 and was appointed Research Associate of the Smithsonian Institution. From 1960 until shortly before his death he was an active member of the National Geographic Society's Committee on Research and Exploration and with his wife, Marion, made frequent inspection tours of the Society's field operations in South America, Africa, Asia, and Europe.

Stirling was born in Salinas, California, and graduated from the University of California in 1920, after serving as an Ensign in the Navy from 1917 to 1919. He received an M.A. degree from George Washington University in 1922 and an honorary Sc.D. from Tampa University in 1943.

From 1921 to 1924 Stirling was on the Smithsonian staff, first as Aide, then Assistant Curator in the Division of Ethnology, where he worked on the Museum's exhibits and storage collections. Matt found respite from such museum chores in travel and fieldwork. In the summer of 1922 he made a bicycle trip through the cave country of France and Spain, and the next year he made the first of many field trips to Florida.

He also excavated burials at four Arikara village sites near Mobridge, South Dakota, which contained large quantities of cultural material illustrative of early 18th century Plains Indian culture; this unique and valuable collection was later described by Waldo R. Wedel in *Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin* 157 (1955).

In March 1924 Stirling resigned from the National Museum and a few months later set out on a journey across South America, where he spent several weeks among the primitive Campa and Amuesha Indians in Peru.

In 1925 he organized the Stirling New Guinea Expedition, sponsored by the Smithsonian, to explore the unknown interior of Dutch New Guinea north of the central mountain area, with an airplane especially equipped for the purpose. Up to that time aircraft had been little used in exploration. Eventually, through the official participation of the Netherlands Colonial Government, Stirling's original plan grew into an operation involving four ships, the airplane (the first to fly in Dutch New Guinea), and several hundred Malay soldiers, convicts, and Dyak canoemen. Penetrating the interior from the north coast, he lived for two months among a previously unknown people, a group of pygmy Negritos now sometimes referred to as mountain Papuans, on the north slope of the Nassau Mountains. He measured 140 male and female Negritos and collected large quantities of stone axes, knives, chisels, bows and arrows, armor, woven bags, gourd penis covers, fiber skirts, and ornaments—the full range of portable material culture of the last truly Stone Age people in that part of the world. Stirling's collection of Negrito and Papuan material, numbering 3,451 specimens, is now one of the most valuable in the National Museum.

The Stirling expedition returned from New Guinea in 1927, and the following year he was appointed Chief of the Bureau of American Ethnology. Stirling's selection for this post seemed logical. The B.A.E. was that rarity in Washington—a Government bureau that over the years had not grown in size but had maintained a consistently high level of accomplishment. Matt accepted his inherited staff and encouraged its members to continue their research as before. But he brought in others of his own choosing, and these too he encouraged in self-expression—Homer G. Barnett, Henry B. Collins, Jr., Philip Drucker, William N. Fenton, George M. Foster, Alfred Metraux, Julian H. Steward, W. Duncan Strong, William C. Sturtevant,

Winslow Walker, and Gordon R. Willey.

Seventy B.A.E. Bulletins were published during the period of Stirling's administration, in addition to 56 Anthropological Papers, a new series which he established in 1938. Other special Bureau projects inaugurated during his administration were the seven-volume Handbook of South American Indians and the Institute of Social Anthropology, both organized and directed by Julian H. Steward, and the River Basin Surveys, a massive archaeological salvage program operated jointly with the Department of the Interior and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and headed by Frank H. H. Roberts, Jr. Similarly, the Ethnogeographic Board, the Smithsonian's only organized effort to make its scientific resources available to the military agencies during World War II, was essentially a Bureau operation, as Stirling assigned staff members to carry out its work under the direction of a former B.A.E. anthropologist, Duncan Strong.

Soon after he became Director of the B.A.E. Stirling became involved in activities arising from the Depression. He directed archaeological investigations in several states under the W.P.A. program and was thus able to insure that some of these work relief efforts produced permanent results in archaeology. He assumed personal direction of the W.P.A. excavations in Florida, where one of the supervisors was his brother Gene, who, with his wife, later established the Stirling Award in Anthropology, administered by the American Anthropological Association. Recognizing the differences, mainly ceramic, in mounds and shell heaps in different parts of the state, Matt Stirling proposed the presently accepted scheme of archaeological zones in Florida. In 1931-32 he spent four months studying the Jivaro and Cuna Indians, and in later years did archaeological work in Ecuador, Panama, and Costa Rica, the results of which appear in his bibliography.

In 1933 Stirling married Marion Illig, and they became a husband and wife team, sharing the experiences of field work and research in Latin America. Five of his publications carry Marion's name as co-author. In 1958 Stirling retired as Director of the B.A.E. and seven years later the Bureau was abolished as a separate unit and merged with the Department of Anthropology of the National Museum.

Matthew Stirling's greatest impact was in the field of Mexican archaeology, where his pioneer investigations brought the first solid evidence of what is now recognized as the oldest civilization in Mesoamerica. When Stirling began his work in Mexico in 1938, it

was the generally accepted view that the Maya represented both the beginning and culmination of native American civilization. However, in areas adjacent to the Maya center there were indications of other somewhat simpler Maya-like cultures, including the "Olmec" in Veracruz. Here, since 1869, there had been isolated finds—a colossal head and carved jade axes depicting baby-faced, jaguar-like figures—an art style which, though in some respects Maya-like, was quite different from the elaborate and florid style of classic Maya. Stirling had been skeptical of the orthodox view that Maya culture as then known was the *fons et origo* of American civilization; consideration should be given, he thought, to cultural developments in peripheral areas, and accordingly he initiated a program of archaeological investigations in areas marginal to the Maya center. Proceeding on this plan, Duncan Strong (1933-36) began work in Honduras where he discovered culture stages at least as old as Mamon (early Maya). Stirling's own work on the western margin—a series of Smithsonian-National Geographic Society expeditions to investigate Olmec sites in Veracruz and Tabasco—met with immediate and spectacular success. Stirling's suspicion that this may have been an important culture center were more than borne out. Tres Zapotes and La Venta, where he worked in 1939 and 1940 with his colleagues Philip Drucker and later Waldo Wedel, proved to be huge sites with large earthen pyramids, courts, stone monuments, elaborate tombs, altars, and carvings. From all indications, including a stela with a surprisingly early date equivalent to 31 B.C., these sites seemed clearly older than and possibly ancestral to Maya. Mayan specialists scoffed at the idea that the calendrical system and the whole panoply of Mayan civilization were to be traced to the lowly Olmec. But Stirling's discoveries continued apace, the most impressive being the Early Classic sites of Cerro de las Mesas and Izapa and the huge Olmec site of San Lorenzo, which Michael Coe's later excavations brought to fame. With the publication of Stirling's reports, Drucker's ceramic studies, and finally the detailed report on La Venta by Drucker, Heizer, and Squier (B.A.E. Bulletin 170, 1959) with radiocarbon dates, the evidence became overwhelming. Olmec was indeed the oldest known civilization in Mesoamerica and, in the view of most archaeologists concerned with the problem, the primary source of the other civilizations that followed. Olmec dates ranged from just before the beginning to near the end of the first millennium B.C. The 31 B.C. date on Stela C at Tres Zapotes, which critics had

refused to accept as an actual, contemporary date because it was so much older than Maya, belonged instead to the very end of the thousand-year-old Olmec sequence.

Stirling's once unorthodox views on the origin and development of Middle American civilization are now generally accepted, but at the same time they tend to be more or less taken for granted; often little or no attention is given to his pioneer discoveries that brought the Olmec civilization to light. But those working most directly with the Olmec problem have emphasized Stirling's key role. In Coe's words, "Our first real knowledge of southern Veracruz-Tabasco is entirely based on the explorations and excavations carried out under the direction of M. W. Stirling in the years since 1938 at several sites of great importance" (*Handbook of Middle American Indians*, Vol. 3, Part 2, 1965, p. 681). Robert Heizer states explicitly, "The discovery of the several major Olmec sites, the finding of most of the stone monuments at these places, and the initial excavations to examine mound structures and secure ceramic collections were

due to the earlier efforts of one man, Matthew W. Stirling . . ." (*Dumbarton Oaks Conference on the Olmec*, E. P. Benson, ed., 1968, p. 9). Heizer concludes with what could be an epitaph, "... even though Olmec may not be a mother-culture, it still has a father-figure in the person of Matthew W. Stirling" (p. 24).

To his friends and associates, Matt will be remembered as one who remained ever youthful and alert, who never sought authority or advantage, but delighted in the give and take of good fellowship. Witty, deeply perceptive, and with a knowing tolerance of others' foibles, he was a friend to be cherished. He is survived by his wife, Marion, a brother, Gene, a son, Matthew Jr., daughter, Ariana, and one granddaughter.

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Stirling's bibliography, of 126 titles, appears with Michael D. Coe's obituary in the January 1976 issue of *American Antiquity* (Vol. 41, No. 1, pp. 67-73).