

Coming to Terms With the Life, Loves, and Work of Henry A. Murray

Forrest G. Robinson

Love's Story Told: A Life of Henry A. Murray

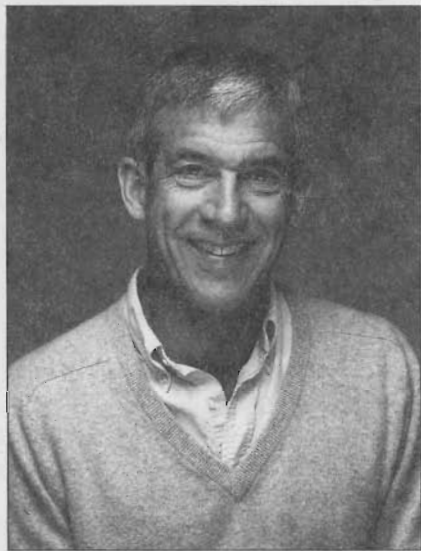
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Personality psychologists, at least a subset of them, have often tended to idealize Henry A. Murray as a founding father of the field. He is seen as a critic of sterile scientism, a champion in linking psychodynamic and academic psychology, and a personally compelling advocate of the study of whole persons and lives and the deepest human experiences. Such idealization will be harder to come by after reading this biography by Forrest G. Robinson, who presents a provocative, beautifully written, "gloves-off," examination of connections between the man, his work, and his loves.

I found the book profoundly engaging, forcing me to reexamine what I previously knew about the man and his work. It led me to re-read and reinterpret his writings about personality psychology,

psychoanalysis, Herman Melville, and mythology. Robinson's biography is so compelling and evocative, that it raises basic issues such as the rewards and possible dangers of "deep-diving" into the unconscious, the ecstasies and painful human costs of pursuing love with a soul mate outside of marriage, and the personal meanings of engagement with psychoanalysis, academic psychology, literature, and mythology. As the book draws on a great deal of material about Murray's relationship with his lifelong mistress, Christiana Morgan, it may well be the most intimate and personally revealing biography of a psychologist yet written. In talking about the book with friends and colleagues, particularly those who knew Murray or his work, I was struck by the wide array of responses to the story, ranging from fascination and rapt absorption to curiosity and intellectual puzzlement to disgust or moral disapproval.

Let us start by considering an earlier idealization of Murray held by many of his supporters, recognizing that there were also critics such as E. G. Boring or Karl Lashley. One version of this idealized portrait was compactly summarized by Joseph Adelson (1981), who said that it was hard to avoid clichés and described Murray as a Renaissance man, a legendary figure, and a founder of contemporary psychology.

What is most dazzling about the man and the career is his extraordinary versatility, the protean nature of his talents and achievements. He has been the following, in (rough) chronological order: an athlete, an undergraduate student of history, a playboy, a



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physician, a surgeon, an embryologist, an anatomist, an orthodox psychoanalyst, an unorthodox psychoanalyst, the co-inventor of the Thematic Apperception Test, the director of Harvard's Psychological Clinic, one of the fathers of the experimental study of personality, our Government's chief selector of undercover agents during World War II, the prime developer of complex assessment methods in the study of personality, an adoring student and scholar of the life and works of Herman Melville. (p. 33)

In reading Robinson's more detailed portrait, one sees that there is truth in all of this, yet there is a darker side as well. Murray was also a self-acknowledged narcissist, a man who refused to publicly acknowledge his mistress and central love of his life for more than 40 years, yet who somehow still believed that this love was



Christiana Morgan (Photo courtesy of Harvard University Archives)

going to be a turning point in world history and culture. He was also a Melville scholar unable to publish the 1,000-page biography of Melville largely completed early in his career and an intellectual who left nearly a dozen substantial projects uncompleted, lying like wrecks of partly built ships on a beach, never launched into the seas of public opinion. He could provide the warmest and most stimulating atmosphere for his students and colleagues—as done with the group who produced *Explorations in Personality* (1938)—yet he was bitterly disappointing to many in later years. Given his substantial accomplishments and immense talents, he was in some ways inhibited in his productivity, completing only a fraction of what he undertook. He aimed high, and perhaps too high, a man who could well have had personal reasons for his work on the myth of Icarus, who flew too close to the sun, melted his wings, and fell to the sea.

Henry Alexander Murray was born to a wealthy New York family on May 13, 1893. His father was a banker, and Murray grew up near Fifth Avenue, on what is now the site of Rockefeller Center. As a child, Harry, as he was called, came to the "grievous (and valid) realization that he could count on only a limited third-best portion of his mother's love" (p. 13) and that he had, also in his own words, "a marrow of misery and melancholy repressed by pride and practically extinguished in everyday life by a counteracting disposition of sanguine and expansive buoyancy" (p. 14). He dutifully attended Groton and then went on to Harvard College in the class of 1915, where he majored in history and served

as captain of the crew team, but was as much a playboy and dilettante as anything else. Intellectually, he caught fire at the Columbia College of Physicians and Surgeons and graduated at the top of his class with a medical degree in 1919. He then went on to do research in embryology, studying at Rockefeller Institute and Cambridge University, and received a doctorate in physiological chemistry from the latter in 1927.

Robinson begins his elegantly written and emotionally evocative account of Murray's life by describing a fateful ocean voyage Murray took in 1924. He was on his way to study at Cambridge University, traveling with his wife and daughter, to meet his brother and Christiana and Will Morgan in England. The friendship with the Morgans was ostensibly based on common intellectual interests; there was, however, also a strong yet publicly unrecognized romantic interest between Murray and Christiana Morgan that would lead to sexual union in Europe the following year.

By chance, Murray had been given a copy of Melville's *Moby Dick* by a surgical friend before starting the ocean voyage. He began reading *Moby Dick* and was powerfully moved by it in a way that was to occupy him for decades. During the voyage, the ship's captain developed appendicitis; he was operated on, with assistance from Murray, by Sir John Bland-Sutton, President of the Royal College of Surgeons who was also a Melville enthusiast and who was just returning from the United States where he had been collecting information about Melville. In this single voyage, we see three themes that became central to the course of Murray's life: his fascination with Herman Melville—whom he saw as an unrivaled explorer of human depths—his emerging relationship with Christiana Morgan, and his beginning engagement with Jung and the psychodynamic tradition. Robinson's account focuses on the interplay of these themes.

Melville was one of the three major concerns in Harry's adult life. The other two were the study of dynamic psychology and union with Christiana Morgan. These strands, tightly interwoven as they were in his experience, formed an anchor line sunk in the vast ocean of the unconscious. All three took him where he most wanted to go; and all three brought him back to himself. (p. 140)

Psychologists may be generally familiar with the range of Murray's achievements and contributions, such as the foundational book *Explorations in Per-*



Henry A. Murray (Photo courtesy of Harvard University Archives)

sonality and the team of coinvestigators that included Robert White, Donald MacKinnon, Nevitt Sanford, Erik Erikson, and others who went on to shape the field; his coauthorship of the Thematic Apperception Test with Christiana Morgan in 1935; his classic article "What Should Psychologists Do About Psychoanalysis?" (1940); *Assessment of Men* (1948); the widely used reader *Personality in Nature, Society, and Culture*, edited with Clyde Kluckhohn (1948); a presidential address, "The Personality and Career of Satan" (1962); his autobiography (1967); and perhaps some of his writings on Melville, culture, and mythology. An excellent collection of this work is gathered in Edwin Shneidman's *Endeavors in Psychology: Selections From the Personology of Henry A. Murray* (1981).

How does a reading of Robinson's biography affect our understanding of Murray's work? It provides valuable insights into the context of, the course of, and in some cases, even the meanings of Murray's writings. In particular, it brilliantly illuminates the complexities of Murray's lifelong relationship with the work and life of Herman Melville. Although he strongly identified with Melville, that same identification may have prevented him from ever publishing his Melville biography. In Melville's *Pierre*, Murray found a stunning degree of similarity to the unfolding story of his attraction to his own mysterious soulmate, Christiana Morgan. In providing a detailed account of the course of this relationship, Robinson's biography says more about the connections between love and intellectual work than any other book

about a social scientist that I have seen. It also clarifies a number of the indirect or oblique references in Murray's work to the creative power of erotic love, the importance of dyadic relationships in creativity, and Murray's ideas about social change through cultural renewal. I do not necessarily agree with all of the interpretations, but Robinson's biography is an important milestone in the search for understanding about Murray and about the humanistic-experiential-literary side of psychology.

When Robinson first proposed writing this biography in 1970, Murray replied that there was little to tell, except for a 40-year secret love affair that had revolutionized his life. The object of his affections was Christiana Morgan, born in 1887 to a wealthy Boston Brahmin family. Her father was a professor at Harvard Medical School. She attended finishing school, served as a nurse in World War I, married Will Morgan in 1919, and bore a son in 1920. She was introduced to Harry Murray in 1923 at a performance of Wagner's *Parsifal* at the Metropolitan Opera in New York City. At a dinner party several months later, she asked Murray the fateful question of what he thought about Jung as compared to Freud. Murray admitted he did not know, but hearing her advocacy of Jung, he began reading Jung's recently published *Psychological Types*. They shared their excitement about this book; by the summer of 1924, the Murrays and Morgans were on their way to spend a year together in Cambridge.

Faced with a "score of bi-horned dilemmas" (p. 126), Murray traveled to meet Jung on his Easter vacation from Cambridge in 1925. Once the issue of Harry's growing attachment to Christiana Morgan came up, Jung told Murray about his own relationship with his wife Emma Jung and his "inspiratrice," Toni Wolff. Jung advised Murray against going into psychology and was not encouraging about the relationship with Christiana, but Harry ended up following Jung's example more than his advice.

Christiana Morgan saw Jung in therapy for several months in the summer and fall of 1926 and began producing a series of images and visions that fascinated Jung and that resonated with his own. He commented that her visions provided "enough material for the next two or three hundred years" (p. 162) and from 1930 to 1934 conducted a series of "Vision Seminars" on them (published as a book in 1976). Murray was also immensely drawn to Christiana Morgan's

visions and her being as a path to the unconscious. "The whole spiritual course of man will pivot on you," he said to her in 1927, as recorded in her notebooks. He agreed that their relationship, the dyad, would be primary in his life and that his work on the Melville biography would be no more than a "training ground" for the writing they would do on the meaning of her visions. Their relationship followed a painful course, including sadomasochistic phases, over the following decades. A continuing conflict was Christiana's desire for Harry to devote more of his life to her and her visions, while he was involved in a wider world of being a professor at Harvard, life in Washington, D.C., during World War II, and a variety of other cultural interests; he also had ambivalence about their joint project of exploring the unconscious and writing about the history and theory of their love. In a tragic denouement, Christiana gave way increasingly to alcoholism, Harry failed to write his part of their joint project, and did not marry her after his wife died in 1962. In 1967 Christiana Morgan died, perhaps from a heart attack or from suicide, in less than two feet of water on a beach in the West Indies where the two were vacationing. A feminist interpretation of Morgan is given by Douglas (1993), who provides additional information about her life, visions, and relationships. Harry went on to an apparently happy second marriage with psychologist Nina Chandler Fish in 1969.

The great social and historical importance Murray attributed to "the dyad" with Morgan and the new culture that was supposed to emerge from it seems puzzling, grandiose, maybe even just plain nutty. What could he have had in mind? One clue is provided in the 1959 paper "Vicissitudes of Creativity," in which he described a couple called Adam and Eve (presumably he and Christiana) who engaged in episodes of "periodic complete emotional expression—not unlike the orgiastic rites of early Greek religion"; Eros supplied the energy for these rites and the pair were aided by some sort of intoxicant. Such complete emotional expression is offered as a corrective to

both the traditional Christian doctrine of repression of primitive impulses and the psychoanalytic notion of the replacement of the id by the ego (rationality), which results so often in a half-gelded, cautious, guarded, conformist, uncreative, and dogmatic way of coping with the world. (Shneidman, 1981, p. 327)

Murray went on to argue that the sustaining mythologies, philosophies, or ideologies of a culture may originate in the unconscious of one or a few persons, often out of suffering, and then spread to and be elaborated by others. These themes of cultural regeneration or transformation had ties to work Murray was familiar with both in Jung and in Nietzsche, with the significance of Nietzschean influences in Murray's thought a topic needing further exploration. In any case, as Robinson phrases it, there was a vast difference between the idealistic picture of a male-female dyad creating a new culture and "the furtive, failing love affair to which it corresponded in his own life" (p. 346). The course of this relationship as described and interpreted by Robinson makes painful reading, as there seems to be too little care and compassion, grandiosity, and a limited degree of self-understanding.

How are we to interpret Robinson's biography of Murray? And what will be its influence on his reputation and perhaps the kinds of work he advocated? *Love's Story Told* is certainly not an idealizing "myth of the hero," as was Ernest Jones's biography of Freud. For some, this book may make it easier to dismiss the man and his ideas, as did a reviewer for *The New York Times*, Anna Fels, who was so upset by the story that she did not say much about the man, his work, or the ties between them (Fels, 1993). But for those interested in the connections between life and work, this biography is a fascinating and troubling analysis of the potential complexities of such relationships, relationships that are sometimes at the heart of psychology and its diverse traditions—as in the cases of Freud, Jung, Klein, Horney, Sullivan, Kohut, Lacan, and others.

To give a sample of other reactions, Alfred Kazin (1993) in the *New York Review of Books* described *Love's Story Told* as a "remarkable biography, with a startling tale to tell about the man who is its subject, the woman he loved, and the literary presences and psychological myths that dominated their lives" (p. 3). Paul Roazen (1993) argued that the biography exaggerates the importance of the relationship with Christiana Morgan and that more attention should be paid to the ideas of intellectuals with whom Murray interacted, such as Talcott Parsons and Clyde Kluckhohn, in forming Harvard's Department of Social Relations. Rodney Triplett (1993), author of an excellent dissertation on Murray's

early academic career, found that Robinson effectively reveals "the person at the core of personology" and the subsequent need to reevaluate past scholarship on Murray in this light.

Even though I found the book tremendously absorbing and illuminating regarding many dimensions of Murray's life, there were aspects of Robinson's interpretation that I had trouble integrating with my own prior understanding of the man (cf. Anderson, 1988; Elms, 1987). I first met Murray in 1970, as a graduate student at Harvard University and found that his encouragement, vitality, and infectious enthusiasm inspired me in some way almost every time we talked, from our first meeting through the next 17 years, until a final visit in December 1987, about six months before his death at age 95. Compared with other psychologists, he seemed more alive, to have greater depth and humane learning, greater awareness of inner experience, greater wit and expressiveness, and greater sensitivity to the nuances of social interaction. He could also be self-centered, jealous, and harshly critical of himself and others. He seemed to me a person of unusual stature, who gave me a sense of what it might have been like to know Freud or Jung—less influential than them in his publications, but as charismatic and eye-opening in personal interaction as anyone I have ever met.

In light of these perceptions, I was puzzled by and did not know what to make of Robinson's frequent assertions that Harry was deluded or blind in his relationship with Christiana, or about other issues such as his ties to his family or his social class background. Was he narcissistically deluded about this central relationship in his life? By showing me a side of the man of which I was not previously aware, Robinson has persuaded me that this might be so. Was Harry saying things to Christiana he did not necessarily believe (such as that the whole spiritual course of man would pivot on her) as "sweet talk"—in which lovers may say what the other most needs to hear, whether literally true or not? Or, more speculatively, has Robinson's tone and interpretation of this emotionally charged relationship also been affected, perhaps inevitably so, by issues in his own past life and loves, just as Murray's life experience so strongly colored his interpretation of Melville? Or, equally likely, are my own past experiences, even idealizations of Murray, making it difficult for me to assimilate facets of Robinson's interpretation? I remain unresolved on this

issue and hope that further inquiry and discussion may lead to clarification. In this hall of mirrors an old saying comes to mind, "We are still confused, but now we are confused on a higher level." My views on this story have evolved over time and may well continue to do so. I liked and admired the person I knew but feel uneasy about the person emerging from the pages of this book. And you, gentle reader, how will your own past experiences in love and work and your ideas, values, and commitments affect what you make of this whole story? The intricacies of this biography bring to mind the extent to which biographies are not just cool, objective, impersonal accounts but are personally, socially, and culturally constructed and can be interwoven with the fibers of our being, with much potentially at stake, intellectually, emotionally, and culturally. Anyone interested in the history and biography of psychology will have to make their own way through this material and reach their personal conclusions, coming to terms with it on their own.

I wonder what Henry Murray might make of this whole controversy? Is he perhaps smiling down from above, pleased with all the attention, satisfied in meeting his obligation to Christiana Morgan that their story has finally been told (in at least one version) and happy to see so much attention devoted to the issue of connections between individual personality and intellectual work—one of the questions that motivated his initial meeting with Jung? Are perhaps a few of his many selves also grinning up from below, embarrassed by features of this portrait, perhaps even feeling betrayed by the relatively unsympathetic account of his relationship with Christiana Morgan? *Love's Story Told*, although fascinating and deeply revealing about the man, needs to be complemented by other studies, focusing more on Murray's place in the intellectual, interpersonal, and institutional history of psychology. It may be only fitting, however, that this first biography directs attention in such dramatic and compelling fashion to the power of the study of lives and to the complex ways in which life, love, and work can inform and shape each other.

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