Bio-Bibliography: John Barron Mays (1914-1987)

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Michael R. Hill

JOHN BARRON MAYS developed a humane sociological perspective with multiple roots, including formal training in English, firsthand experience in a settlement house, a distinguished university professorship in sociology, and lifelong work as an active poet.² Mays’ felicitous professional publications often spoke not only to university colleagues but also to constituencies beyond the halls of academe on a series of interrelated topics, including adolescence, criminology, education, urban life, and poetry.

BIOGRAPHY

John Barron Mays was born July 7, 1914. His academic training included a B.A. with Honors in English Language and Literature from the University of Liverpool in 1937, followed immediately by a Diploma in Education, again from the University of Liverpool, in 1938. Mays then began a twenty-year period as a school teacher (1938-40), youth worker (1940-46), and finally as Warden and Youth Leader in the University of Liverpool Settlement (1946-55). Teaching and his post in the University Settlement introduced him experientially to several themes (education, juvenile delinquency, and urban life, among others) that he explored more formally during his subsequent life as a university researcher.

May’s work with inner-city youth was apparently interpersonally intense and exacted enormous emotional investments. He explored these tensions (and their rural resolution) in a semi-fictional, quasi-autobiographical reflection, *A Hut in the Hills* (Mays 1980).

¹ *Sociological Origins*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (Spring 2006): 111-114. All rights reserved. Please visit our free website (www.sociological-origins.com) for additional information and other features.

² For their kind and expert help in completing this bio-bibliography, I am indebted to Professor Nicholas Mays (London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine), Professor Ken Roberts (Department of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work Studies, University of Liverpool), Mr. Adrian Allen (University Archivist, Special Collections and Archives, Liverpool University Library, University of Liverpool), and Professor Kathleen A. Johnson (University Libraries, University of Nebraska-Lincoln).
Mays completed an M.A. in Social Science at the University of Liverpool in 1953, and a Ph.D. in 1961.

Mays’ specifically academic career of twenty-five years unfolded at the University of Liverpool. During the post-war era of expanding research opportunities in English universities, he was appointed Research Lecturer in the Department of Social Science in 1955, and was promoted to Senior Research Lecturer in 1961. In 1965, he was selected to fill the newly created Eleanor Rathbone Chair of Sociology — a post he held until his retirement in 1980. He served as Head of the Department from 1969 to 1976, “guiding it through a phase of major expansion and change in a new Faculty” (“Professor J.B. Mays” 1980: 22).

A distinguishing feature of sociological research at Liverpool was a concerted effort to link theory and methods with pragmatic issues, and to collaborate with the communities under study:

> We have always acted on the assumption that a project should not proceed unless there is an understanding and acceptance of its aims on the part of the “subjects” involved. This is not only a moral issue, but also in our experience a pragmatic necessity, at least in the long run. If people understand and endorse a project, they are likely to co-operate more fully; more importantly, one of the main assets of a University in research is its independence, and this is best safeguarded if all the main parties endorse a project which may involve or affect them. (Scott and Mays 1960:111).

Building on his early training in English Language and Literature, Mays became an accomplished and well-published poet. He was also “a prominent broadcaster, taking part for many years in Round Britain Quiz” (“Prof. John Mays” 1987). With his wife, Angela, he had two children (Alexandra and Nicholas). John Barron Mays died on October 21, 1987, at age 72.

MAJOR THEMES

Known today primarily among criminologists, Mays (together with Maurice Craft) was also the senior instrumental General Editor for some three decades of Longman’s book series on Aspects of Modern Sociology. This series sponsored dozens of accessible, up-to-date works on specific topics that opened sociology not only to students but also to a wide reading public under three general headings: The Social Structure of Modern Britain; Social Processes; and Social Research. Titles in the later series included: The Limitations of Social Research, Social Research Design, Sources of Official Data, History of Social Research Methods, Deciphering Data, The Philosophy of Social Research, and Techniques of Data Collection. This sequence sought “to offer an informative but not uncritical introduction to some of the methodologies of social science” (Mays and Craft 1980: ix). Mays wrote poetry throughout his life and,
according to Kenneth Roberts, “John always felt that there were affinities between sociology and his original subject.”

CRITIQUES

Mays’ sociological work generally received favorable notices. Kenneth Roberts reports that *Growing Up in the City* was a “hit,” and “is still in reading lists today.” In a characteristic Chicago school-style broadside, however, Donald Cressey (1955: 509) approved of *Growing Up in the City* to the extent that Mays utilized the “writings and research of Thrasher, Shaw and McKay, Whyte, and Glueck,” but faulted Mays for having made “no mention of Sutherland.” In reviewing Paul Meadows and Ephraim Mizruchi’s reader on *Urbanism, Urbanization and Change*, Mays (1971: 222) got in a sharp retort: “It is something of a relief in fact to find a reader in urban sociology not having to quote at length from the Chicago school but getting on with more up-to-date contributions . . . .” Mays’ poetry typically received brief but appreciative comment in literary magazines. The linkage between Mays’ poetry, on the one hand, and sociology, on the other, went largely unappreciated by Mays’ critics, at least in print. Ken Roberts noted that “At the time, when British sociology was professionalising, a section of the profession queried whether John Mays’ work was proper sociology,” and that when *The Poetry of Sociology* first appeared, “One colleague argued caustically that the publishers must have mis-set the title — surely it should have been the sociology of poetry.”

REFERENCES

**Selected Works by John Barron Mays**


For a comprehensive list of publications and poetry by John Barron Mays, see the bibliography in David M. Downes, *Crime and the City: Essays in Memory of John Barron Mays*. (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 1989).

**Works Related to John Barron Mays**


**Archives and Unpublished Materials**

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