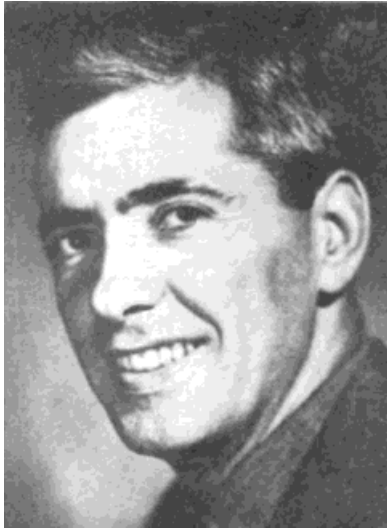


## Ashley Montagu, 1905–1999



Ashley Montagu

With the passing of 94-year-old Ashley Montagu on November 26, evolutionary anthropology lost its most articulate (and quite possibly its first) modern exponent. The word “erudite” seems almost inadequate to describe the breadth of Montagu’s writings, but they were centered around the human condition and its evolutionary basis. In the latter part of his life, Montagu’s main theme was the malleability and adaptability of the modern person, and it is tempting to speculate that it stemmed from his continuing self-invention and reinvention.

Born Israel Ehrenberg in London’s

East End, he made the acquaintance of Sir Arthur Keith at age 12 when he brought the famed anatomist a skull found by his friend’s father on the banks of the Thames. He studied anthropology in the early 1920s at University College London and the London School of Economics, and came under the influence of Bronislaw Malinowski. His course of study included physical anthropology from Grafton Elliot Smith, psychology from Charles Spearman, and statistics from Karl Pearson. In college he renamed himself Montague Francis Ashley-Montagu (later abridged to simply Ashley Montagu), and emigrated to New York in 1927.

Although he went to lengths to wallpaper his origins, Montagu never denied them. He told me decades later that changing his name was the smartest thing he ever did; doors opened for “M.F. Ashley-Montagu” that would never have opened for “Israel Ehrenberg.” In the 1960s, segregationist activists like Carleton Putnam (and his cousin, anthropologist Carleton Coon) would trumpet this “discovery” to impeach Montagu, apparently never grasping the irony that it was because of people like them that people like him perceived the need to change their names!

In New York, William King Gregory introduced him to F. Wood Jones’ anatomical work, which argued for tarsiers being the sister group of humans. Montagu took up comparative primate anatomy and in 1931 he secured (with the aid of Aleš Hrdlička) an appointment teaching at the New York University Dental School. Montagu ultimately took a Ph.D. at Columbia in 1937 under Ruth Benedict and Franz Boas in cultural anthropology, and published his thesis as *Coming Into Being Among the Australian Aborigines; a Study of the Procreative Beliefs of the Native Tribes*.

Montagu’s academic trajectory, unfortunately, was far from ideal. He was known for his sharp and critical tongue. Earnest Hooton, for example, once inscribed a book, “To my prickly friend.” Hrdlička told a reporter, “Ashley Montagu—if every one of us were to accept his ideas, he would be back the next day saying the very opposite!” W.W. Howells (*Annu Rev Anthropol* 1992;21:4) recounts this exchange at a meeting of the American Association of Physical Anthropologists, around 1940:

Ashley Montagu had considerable gifts in anatomy and anthropological history, as well as one for treading on his seniors’ toes. His listed paper was on the pyramidalis muscle in the primates, but he announced a change of title and launched into an attack on some recent writing of Hooton’s. Hooton, seated right in front of him, listened with utter amicability, thanked Montagu, and offered to give a paper on the pyramidalis muscle.

Montagu would come to experience academic life at its crudest. He moved to Hahnemann Medical School in Philadelphia, and then to Rutgers, but his academic sponsors (Malinowski, Boas, and Benedict) all died in the 1940s, leaving the outspoken scholar unprotected from backbiting colleagues. When he ultimately was forced to leave Rutgers in the reactionary conservative political climate of the 1950s, Montagu found himself middle-aged and unable to secure another teaching post. His adaptation was to devote his life to popular writing and speaking.

The academic enemies who had prevented him from getting another university post now began to disparage him as a “popularizer.” Montagu

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in fact had made, and would continue to make, significant contributions to the primary anthropological literature on a regular basis—and not simply to the physical anthropology literature, but to other areas of anthropology, psychology, and the history of science.

Montagu's 1933 study of the variation in the pterion region of the side of the primate skull (Am J Phys Anthropol 1933;18:189–336), for example, was referred to me as a definitive work by a distinguished primate anatomist just a few years ago. His monograph on Edward Tyson, who published the first anatomical description of a chimpanzee in 1699, was an extraordinary piece of research, an obvious labor of love (Mem Am Philos Soc 1943;20:xxix—488).

Montagu's most courageous and long-lasting contribution, however, was to begin to undermine the scientific basis of the race concept (J Hered 1941;32:243–247), which is what helped earn him the enmity of the most powerful mid-century physical anthropologists and biologists. This work, however, culminated in the strong and prescient first (1950) UNESCO statement on race.

He joined forces with geneticist Theodosius Dobzhansky to publish "Natural Selection and the Mental Capacities of Mankind" (Science 1947; 105:587–590), and later to challenge the abuse of science represented by Carleton Coon's 1962 *The Origin of Races*, which held the social, economic, and political oppression of dark-skinned peoples to be a biological consequence of their having evolved into *Homo sapiens* more recently than Eurasians, and which was being avidly embraced by segregationists, with the author's blessings (Curr Anthropol 1963;4:360–367).

Although Montagu was a lifelong critic of essentialist arguments about

human nature, especially those which posited violence or aggression as central to human social life, it is somewhat paradoxical to observe a hyphenated neologism in his 1940 *Scientific Monthly* article (1940;50:483–490), "The Socio-Biology of Man."

Perhaps the best measure of the scope of Montagu's scholarship lies in the fact that he wrote definitive textbooks in both physical anthropology (editions in 1945, 1951, and 1960) and human genetics (with Max Levitan, editions in 1971 and 1977). I would venture to suggest that this would be impossible today, without attaining a level of superficiality to which Montagu's work never descended.

He was a frequent guest on the television talk shows—I can recall watching him debate with Richard Herrnstein on the Phil Donahue Show whether XYY syndrome demonstrated the genetic basis of violence, a quarter-century before *The Bell Curve*. Montagu's combination of erudition, wit, good looks, and cultivated English demeanor made him a popular guest of Johnny Carson's Tonight Show. Yet his principal communicative venue was the written word, and he published extensively in accessible forums, working tirelessly to bring human evolutionary science to the public.

Montagu was an early advocate of the idea of neoteny (or fetalization) in human evolution, and in books like *Touching* (1971) and *Growing Young* (1981) he blended evolutionary anthropology and pop psychology skillfully. In published lectures he expounded on such diverse themes as education and immortality. The acclaimed 1980 David Lynch movie *The Elephant Man* was inspired by Montagu's book on John Merrick. Montagu's prodigious output ultimately subsumed over 60 books, of which *Man's Most Dangerous Myth* and *The*

*Natural Superiority of Women* were recently released in new editions.

Montagu garnered many awards and honors throughout his life. Only a few years ago he received the Charles Darwin Award for Lifetime Achievement from the American Association of Physical Anthropologists (AAPA), shortly after the award was established. It was presented at the 1994 AAPA meeting by his long-time friend and co-author, Loring Brace. The following year, the American Humanist Association named him Humanist of the Year.

There will never be another like Ashley Montagu. He was a man of fascinating complexity, perhaps the last great general anthropological scholar, a tireless fighter for the best (and a victim of the worst) of what academics and the human sciences have to offer, and certainly the most quotable anthropologist of all time. Montagu was quite amused when I sent him the centerpiece from a Connecticut "Chili's" restaurant which displayed for their patrons a quotation from one of his popular books. This passage, on the other hand, is from his *Introduction to Physical Anthropology* (1945):

Toward the improvement of the social order physical anthropology has a very important contribution to make. This is not simply because of the grandeur of the story it has to tell, but because of the very appreciable contribution it makes to the better understanding of ourselves and of our fellow men, in a world in which such understanding is not too widely distributed.

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