

RALPH LOVELAND ROYS, 1879–1965

J. ERIC S. THOMPSON

RALPH ROYS, of old New England stock on both sides, was born in Greenville, Michigan, February 14, 1879. He grew up in an intellectual atmosphere; his father was a serious student of history and his mother was in the first freshman class at Vassar. As early as his high school days he had shown an interest in Middle America, for his brother Lawrence, who has supplied material on Ralph's early days, recalls being instructed by him in the intricacies of the Aztec calendar stone at that time. While still in high school, Ralph made a visit to the Peabody Museum, Harvard. Wandering by mistake into the director's office, he got into conversation with the occupant, presumably Dr. F. W. Putnam, who must have been impressed by his qualities, for he personally conducted him around the museum. "That made a dent," as Lawrence put it.

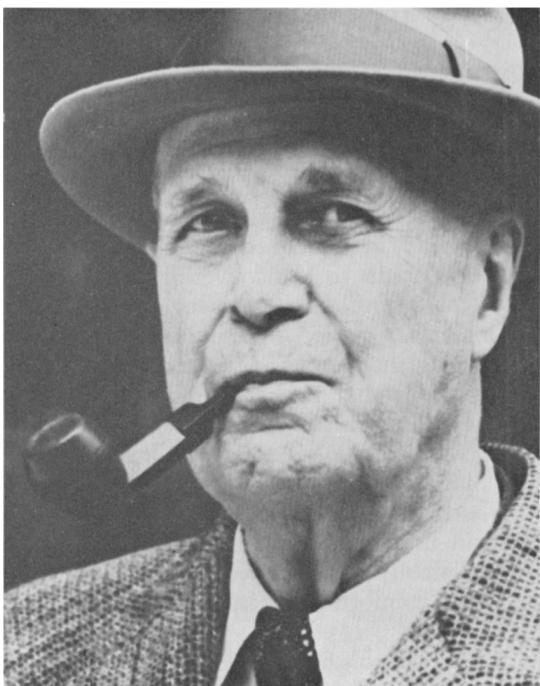
Ralph graduated from the University of Michigan in 1900 with the degree of PH.B., majoring in medieval French. Later, when a chapter of Phi Beta Kappa was established at Michigan, he was elected on the nomination of his former professor, who was by then Dean. He had a flair for languages. In addition to French, he had a good command of German and Spanish, and while working in vacations at his father's lumber mill, he picked up a fair amount of Polish from the men with whom he was working. It was typical of Ralph's thoroughness that he arranged for further tutoring in the language from the Polish priest in the town. In fact he received other linguistic succor from the church, both Catholic Apostolic and Calvinistic; he was coached in advanced French by a French-Canadian priest in Michigan, and some years later he markedly improved his Spanish when he taught a Sunday School class at a Presbyterian mission working among the Mexicans in Los Angeles. His devout mother was overjoyed at this evidence of his mending of ways, but her hopes for Ralph's justification by faith were dashed to the ground when she learned his real motive was a better command of Spanish. He studied Russian on his own after graduation, and purely from linguistic curiosity, and when the U.S.A. entered the first World War, he joined the U.S. military

and diplomatic school at Ann Arbor with Russian as his speciality.

Following graduation, Ralph entered the family lumber business, and as its interests were then chiefly in British Columbia, he moved with his parents to Vancouver about 1911 and lived there until 1940; however, there is a seasonal slack period in the lumber business, and during that he was able to devote himself to his intellectual interests and make outside trips. His first visit to Mexico, where an uncle lived, was in 1906. A trip to Oaxaca nearly cost him his life, for at Mitla he came down with both pneumonia and typhus. Mitla was no place in those days for illness of that nature. With difficulty he was moved to Tule and then, by more comfortable transportation, back to Mexico City.

In 1920 Ralph's first article, *A Maya Account of the Creation*, a translation of a passage in the *Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel*, appeared in the *American Anthropologist*; this was followed by two other articles of a similar type, but it was not until 1921 that he made his first visit to Yucatan, where Eduardo Thompson introduced him to the great Yucatec scholar, Juan Martínez Hernández, who then and later made every effort to help him. "For the next twelve years he was coaching me by mail," Ralph remarked. Another friend and helper in those early days was T. T. Waterman, who had served as assistant to Gates when the latter was Director General of Archaeology in Guatemala. Waterman stimulated his interest in the archaeology of Middle America. In fact, Ralph never overlooked the close connection between archaeology and the colonial sources.

In those early years Ralph spent much time and effort transcribing and making tentative translations of Maya texts. There can hardly have been a Maya manuscript earlier than the mid-nineteenth century of which Ralph did not make a transcription, many of which are in the libraries of Tulane University and Peabody Museum, Harvard. This was a difficult, slow business, but all the time he was soaking up style, language, usage, and grammar of earlier days, often so different from present-day Maya. In the preface to the *Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel* he wrote: "The translation . . . de-



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pends primarily upon the reading given to the badly punctuated and often misspelled Maya text, and such a reading is based upon an extensive comparison with other similar texts." How extensive the comparison was only he knew; few men had his thoroughness. It will be noted that at least seven years passed before he published his first translation.

It is necessary to bear in mind that these were far more than translations; into them went Ralph's great knowledge of Maya custom, thought, and religion which grew with the years, as well as his incomparable mastery of Maya fauna and flora, both so prominent in Maya writing.

Gates, on being appointed director of Tulane University's new-born Department of Middle American Research in 1924, lost little time in recruiting Ralph as the first member of his staff. The appointment was part time and the salary very small, but Ralph, continuing to live in Vancouver and attend to the family's lumber interests, now had the stimulus of recognition and of working for an institution dedicated to Maya research. *The Ethnobotany of the Mayas*, published by Tulane University in 1931, was the first tangible result of that contact and Ralph's first major publication. Of the work

that led to that epic, he wrote me many years later when he was tackling the translation of *Ritual of the Bacabs*, "Old Gates certainly did me a favor when he made me, against my wishes, transcribe and translate all those medical prescriptions, even though their language is very different from the Bacabs."

In 1932 Ralph joined the staff of the Division of Historical Research of Carnegie Institution of Washington, again as a part-time worker and again at a salary which bore no relationship to his talents. The following year saw the publication of his translation and commentary on the Chilam Balam of Chumayel, a work of outstanding scholarship and the first complete translation of a book of Chilam Balam except for that of the Yucatec mystic and poet, Mediz Bolio. Ralph had been at work on this, on and off, for some 15 years. As in all his translations, he never failed to utilize parallel passages to elucidate obscurities in the text, for much material occurs in slightly different versions in all three of the principal books of Chilam Balam, namely, Chumayel, Tizimin, and Mani. Often a miscopied word or phrase in one text is clarified by a parallel passage.

In the thirties Ralph made several trips to Yucatan to improve his Maya and to gather material subsequently incorporated in *The Titles of Ebtun* (1939) and, a long-time project, *The Political Geography of the Yucatan Maya* (1957). He traveled the interior of Yucatan, sometimes alone, sometimes in the company of Lawrence or a colleague, seeking to identify locations of sites mentioned in early documents, particularly with the object of redrawing as reliably as possible the boundaries of the old "Provinces" of Yucatan. This was a long and arduous task which took him by mule and on foot to many remote spots. Ralph was a keen observer and a thorough investigator; he was, indeed, a curious person in the old sense of that word as applied to Samuel Pepys by Evelyn. He took nothing for granted, and very little fell outside his field of interest. Those characteristics are very plain in *Work in Yucatan in the Winter of 1935*, an unofficial report on his wanderings, full of meat. Typical of that approach is this quotation from a letter to me; "When I talked to 100 year old Leandro Poot, veteran of the war of the Castes, in 1935 . . . I cited economic exploitation as a big cause of the outbreak. He emphatically contradicted

me. Said it was because of the way the villagers were kicked around when they did *fagina* in Valladolid, but he seemed to think the actual *fagina* system in Valladolid was all right in itself. He insisted that encroachments on Indian-owned lands, which I also cited, was not a cause at all." So far as I know, Ralph was the only person — certainly the only gringo — to interview one of those who had participated in the early fighting concerning their reasons for taking up arms. It was typical of that ardent interest in all things connected with Yucatan's past and present.

I recall on the trip we made together to Guatemala in 1942, how, when the train pulled out of Puerto Barrios, Ralph, instead of taking it easy in the observation car, was watching every foot of the receding verges of the track in an effort to spot traces of pre-Columbian waterways paralleling the coast which Maya merchants might have used to transport their goods from the Bahia de Santo Tomas to the Motagua. Later in that trip he was at Salama, seeking old folk who might remember a few words of Nahuatl. Then, visiting nearby Rabinal, he brought back the first description of the site since that of Maudslay. Indeed, Roys' summary, given in the Carnegie Institution's annual report for that year, has material on the archaeology of the site then available nowhere else.

The wide knowledge he accumulated on so many facets of Maya culture is reflected in the more out-of-the-way titles of some of his contributions: *Place Names of Yucatan*, *Personal Names of the Maya of Yucatan*, *The Vienna Dictionary*, *Guide to the Codex Perez*, and, in collaboration with Scholes and Adams, *Census and Inspection of the Town of Pencuyut, Yucatan, 1583* and *Report and Census of the Indians of Cozumel, 1570*, with its data on multiple-family houses, both works serenely ignored by the platoons of Maya settlement patterners.

Above all, *The Indian Background of Colonial Yucatan and Conquest Sites and the Subsequent Destruction Maya Architecture in the Interior of Northern Yucatan* are brilliant monuments to his ability to combine research in the field and at his desk. In them, as in all his publications, he felicitously combined caution with sound judgment.

The Maya Chontal Indians of Acalan-Tixchel, a Contribution to the History and Ethnography of the Yucatan Peninsula by Scholes and Roys (1948) was a memorable collaboration

with both talented authors (as Ralph was a fine rower in his youth, the simile is not inapt) using the strong well-timed swing of oarsmen in a two-man racing skiff. Scholes, working in the Archives of the Indies in Seville, had discovered, in 1933, documents on this almost unknown part of southwestern Campeche which not only caused a complete revision of ideas on the route followed by Cortes on his famous march to Honduras in 1525, but also yielded information on a region about which, previously, precious little had been known. Scholes did the historic part; Ralph translated the Chontal Maya text (the only example of colonial Chontal Maya writing known) and made a magnificent survey of the ethnography of a region previously ignored by all students. It was a brilliant partnership, and I have no doubt the report will be the definitive study of the region until the start of the twenty-first century, and perhaps longer.

In 1949 Ralph published a translation of the first 13 pages of the Book of Chilam Balam of Tizimin, together with the parallel passage in Mani. This part gives the prophecies for a series of tuns or of 365-day years, an extremely difficult piece of work because of its esoteric nature. Then, in the last years of his life, giving way to my constant urgings, he reluctantly undertook the translation of *The Ritual of the Bacabs*. With typical modesty he felt that a competent translation of those extremely difficult chants, replete with mystic passages based on long-lost myths, religious concepts, and erotic symbolism of the creation, was beyond his powers. He was not far short of eighty years when he began the work in earnest, which aided by a Bollingen grant, he continued until a few months before his death.

While the book was going through the press (University of Oklahoma) Ralph, then in his eighty-seventh year, underwent an operation, from which his recovery was slow. It was a very great effort for him to read page proof, but he had the pleasure of seeing the book off the press before the end. By then he was failing rapidly, and his death in December, from a heart attack, came two months short of his eighty-seventh birthday.

The Bacabs translation, a really great piece of scholarship, adds enormously to our fund of data on Maya religion. It was a most difficult text, but one in which Ralph's unique

knowledge of Maya fauna and flora names was to prove very helpful. Because of the recondite nature of the material and the ambiguities of the largely monosyllabic nature of Yucatec Maya, alternative versions of many passages are possible. Moreover, the usual copyists' mistakes make for more uncertainty. Probably in the course of time another translation will be made, offering somewhat different versions of some passages, some better, some worse than Ralph's, but his is the pioneer effort on which any subsequent translator will build. Needless to say, he was by far the greatest gringo scholar in Maya; on a world basis he shares honors with the Yucatecan writers Juan Martínez Hernández and Alfredo Barrera Vásquez. They had the great advantage of having grown up speaking modern Maya. *Lowland Maya Native Society at Spanish Contact*, a contribution to the *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, is a posthumous publication. A complete list of his writings has been published in my obituary notice in *Estudios de Cultura Maya*, Vol. 6 (1966).

Ralph was extraordinarily generous with his time and knowledge. Over the 30-odd years I had known him, he wrote me hundreds of letters, replying at great length to my interminable stream of questions. Nor was I the only one to whose problems he gave himself unreservedly. Tozzer, when working on his edition of Landa's *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán*, consulted him to an extent few readers of that great compilation realize, and in his Cenote report, Tozzer depended completely on Roys' reconstruction of the history of Yucatan. I saw the carbon of a four-page single-spaced letter he had written in answer to a request from a complete stranger for help in the preparation of a paper on sources of native literature of Middle America. In that reply Ralph outlined every publication or available manuscript on the subject, with comments, a task which in those last years, when his pace had slowed down, must have taken a great deal of time, and, of course, its composition was not of the kind which gives intellectual stimulus to the author; it was for him run-of-the-mill stuff, time-consuming, but not stimulating.

Ralph was not only a kindly man, he was very humble about his own achievements and willing to listen carefully even when an ignoramus on Yucatec, such as myself, had the temerity to suggest an alternative translation

of some passage. He would explain at length and as though talking to an equal, why the suggestion was worthless; occasionally, the suggestion did have merit, and then he would accept it enthusiastically. I recall only one occasion on which he expressed any pride in his work, and he certainly had provocation. A Russian student of the Maya, writing of the difficulty of translating Maya manuscripts such as the books of Chilam Balam, noted how the reader had constantly to decide between Ralph's translation of the opening pages of the Chilam Balam of Tizimin and that of a certain person, who, with a very inadequate knowledge of the Maya language, an inability to read the script correctly, and a lack of even some of the Maya dictionaries, had produced a farrago of nonsense labeled a translation of the Chilam Balam of Tizimin. Ralph remarked mildly that he could not have much confidence in the scholarship of a man who thought the two translations were on a par.

Outside his chosen field, Ralph had the wide interests of a nineteenth-century man of letters; there were few subjects, from the writings of Lucretius to the battles of the American revolutionary war in which he was not interested. Apropos of the latter, I recall driving Ralph along the road by which the British retreated from Concord to Lexington. He was determined to see every detail of the landscape and to note its bearing on the harassing of my countrymen (he wouldn't accept my thesis that in eighteenth-century warfare it just was not cricket to fire at the enemy from behind a hedge without any warning). It was a Sunday, the road was narrow and winding, and soon we were heading a procession of a hundred honking motorists, for every time I exceeded 15 miles per hour, I was bidden to slow down so he could get his details right. Ralph was slightly deaf, and his interest in reconstructing the scene made him oblivious to the din behind. As we entered Lexington the road broadened, and the frustrated drivers swept past. If looks could have killed, one more Briton would have bitten the dust on that historic route.

In 1924 Ralph married Alice Popper, Austrian by birth, who survives him. Their daughter, Katie-Clare Mazzeo, a talented pianist, and her children, were the apples-of-his-eye. Whitman College, Washington, conferred on him a Litt. Hum. D. He also held the honorary rank

of Wade Research Professor of Anthropology at the University of Washington, and he was an honorary Fellow of the Royal Anthropological Institute and a corresponding member of the Academy of American Franciscan History, but what gave him the greatest pleasure was the LL.D. conferred on him by the University of Yucatan. Ralph was then not up to the long journey to Merida to receive this, but finally, through the unceasing efforts of his old friend Licenciado Antonio Canto López, the Univer-

sity agreed to make a special exception and give the degree *in absentia*. He received it a few months before his death. It was a most fitting award, for no man has done more to re-create lowland Maya life, especially the intellectual channels along which it flowed.

On December 12, 1965, this great scholar died. We shall not soon see his like again.

Essex, England
June, 1966