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ROBIN M. WILLIAMS, JR.



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**D**URING THE CENTENNIAL year of his birth, we remember Robin M. Williams, Jr., a member of the American Philosophical Society and the National Academy of Sciences, for exemplifying the finest traditions of these venerable institutions. His long and distinguished career, dedicated to painstaking scientific methods in pursuit of greater understanding of the human condition, drew from a heartfelt desire to illuminate the formulation of good social policy. For Robin, the two objectives were never in conflict. Emerging from the school of North Carolinian liberalism, he considered a defining characteristic of good social policy to be its foundation in factual evidence based in relentless objective inquiry. Research driven by ideological ends, he was fond of saying, “defeated its own objectives,” for it could triumph only in the short term, a proposition based in his own deep belief in the ultimate triumph of truth in human affairs.

To these ends, he authored some one hundred and fifty articles, monographs, and chapters in edited books and contributed to the reformulation of the U.S. military’s training procedures for combat troops, the amici briefs supporting the 1954 Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education*, and the National Research Council’s 1989 assessment of four decades of change in race relations. His last article, “The Long Twentieth Century in American Sociology: A Semi-autobiographical Survey,” was published in 2006 in the *Annual Review of Sociology*. A member of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, a past president of the American Sociological Association and the Eastern Sociological Association, Robin M. Williams, Jr. was founding editor of *Sociological Forum* and co-chair with John Hope Franklin of the National Research Council’s (NRC’s) Committee on the Status of Black Americans. Among his many awards and honors were the American Sociological Association’s Career of Distinguished Scholarship Award, the Commonwealth Award for Distinguished Service, and the Robin M. Williams, Jr., Distinguished Lectureship Award established in his honor by the Eastern Sociological Association.

Robin’s corpus of research increased understanding of some of our society’s most perplexing sociological issues. His lengthy and varied repository of research (spanning aspects of race relations, war and peace, and altruism and cooperation) reveals a common thread. Robin was passionately engaged in an objective search for the soul of a people thrown together across a vast continent from every corner of the world and engaged in a continuing enterprise De Tocqueville famously described as the American experiment in *demos*. Robin’s early, then mid-career, assessments of the experiment can be found in his cogent overview of our nation, *American Society: A Sociological Interpretation* (1951, second edition 1961, third edition 1970).

Born 11 October 1914, in Hillsborough, North Carolina, to farmers Robin M., Sr. and Mabel Williams, Robin Murphy Williams, Jr. received a B.S. in 1933 from North Carolina State College; an M.S. in 1935 from North Carolina State and the University of North Carolina, and an M.A. and Ph.D. from Harvard University in 1939 and 1943, respectively. This academic preparation, in combination with a social background emphasizing both the fundamental practicality of social life and the immense complexity of social relations, underscored a research agenda confronting several of the most challenging social issues of his and our continuing times. With a nod to his farm roots, Robin's research career began in rural sociology when he and the former Marguerite York of Cary, North Carolina, whom he married in 1939, collaborated on a field work project for the University of Kentucky's Agricultural Experiment Station. The collaboration would run for more than six decades with the sagacious and charming Marguerite personifying the phrase "significant other," as she assumed indispensable roles as companion, adviser, and most significant intellectual critic.

Serving in the U.S. War Department's Special Services Division from 1942 through 1946, Robin was diverted by World War II to different concerns. Doing research in Washington, D.C., and combat areas of the European theater, he contributed to the path-breaking study *The American Soldier: Adjustment during Army Life* (Princeton University Press, 1949). This classic sociological treatise was the first comprehensive study of the attitudes of wartime infantrymen. Among other important contributions, such as pioneering a scientific rationale for reorganizing the military's training of its personnel and explaining counterintuitive differences in the attitudes soldiers assigned to a variety of "objective" conditions held toward army life and the war, it introduced to social psychology the important concept of relative deprivation.

After the war, during 1946, Robin began a fifty-seven-year association with the sociology department at Cornell University. During the more than half a century he graced Cornell's sociology department, he served as its chair from 1956 through 1961 and as Henry Scarborough Professor of Social Science from 1967 until he became emeritus professor, a position he held from 1985 to 2003. Barely slowed by the putative "retirement," Robin continued to teach, do research, and publish, dividing time between Cornell and the University of California, Irvine, where he served as a distinguished visiting professor. A few months prior to his death he was teaching at Irvine, where he and Marguerite had spent a large portion of the previous sixteen years.

Cornell and UC Irvine proved congenial and stimulating environments for Robin's creative scientific imagination. His classic 1947 monograph, *The Reduction of Intergroup Tensions*, a fundamental

work examining the empirical conditions regulating the production of equitable race relations, produced valuable nuggets that continue to be found in an amazing variety of contemporary research (often without proper attribution), cementing its reputation as a classic. This gem of research, indicative of Robin's style in many ways, remained one of his proudest lifetime achievements. The following decades produced a stream of important books, beginning with his and Margaret Ryan's 1954 *Schools in Transition*, an early study of school desegregation. The 1960 *What College Students Think* was followed by *Strangers Next Door*, a deservedly famous long-term study (with John Dean and Edward Suchman) of racial and ethnic relations based on interviews of residents in distinctive cities such as Bakersfield, Elmira, Steubenville, and Savannah. *Mutual Accommodation*, another important study of race relations, came in 1977, followed by *A Common Destiny: Blacks and American Society*, which he co-edited in 1989. In 2003, going strong at age eighty-nine, and teaching at UC Irvine, Robin published *The Wars Within: Peoples and States in Conflict* (Cornell University Press).

At seventy-one, his age when we first met, Robin epitomized the septuagenarian version of the sentiment ascendant in popular discourse during the eighties: "Fifty is the new forty." His retirement to emeritus status that year (1985) was belied by his taking up strenuous duties as co-chair with John Hope Franklin of the NRC's Committee on the Status of Black Americans. The committee's charge, to produce a report capable of earning the consent of nearly fifty diverse scholars with strong egos and frequently divergent beliefs, while also passing muster through the NRC's stringent independent review process, was no easy task. The final report, *A Common Destiny: Blacks and American Society* (1989), became the NRC Commission on the Behavioral and Educational Sciences' best-selling book, an achievement that owed much to Robin's intellectual and leadership skills. Both internal politics and external attacks from various national constituencies furnished more than one occasion for the passionate anger he reserved for our private conversations. Even so, Robin also possessed a rare combination of tact and forcefulness, combined with the wisdom to know which situations merited which application. His legendary good humor, good sense, and good judgment frequently defused tense situations brought on by honest and passionate disagreements between exceptional men and women.

A four-year, near-daily collaboration sealed a continuing friendship, introducing me to frequent demonstrations of Robin's wit, charm, and wisdom. Few interactions with Robin, whether conducting business, enjoying a meal, or carrying on an ostensibly mundane conversation,

passed without a resuscitation of one of his brilliantly delivered one-liners or long anecdotes infused with apocryphal edits, always making some sociological point pertinent to the conversation at hand. Thus, although I never entered one of his formal classrooms, I count myself among his many collaborator students enriched by Robin's extraordinary talent for articulating the intricacies of sociological thinking with amazing clarity.

After his so-called "retirement," Robin kept up a whirlwind schedule despite signs of the emphysema that would ultimately slow him down. As if the strenuous demands of chairing the Committee on the Status of Black Americans were not enough, he continued publishing and teaching; he and Marguerite lived a bicoastal life, splitting the academic year between Cornell and UC Irvine. True to the measure of this man, a few months prior to his death, at age ninety-one, Robin taught a course at UC Irvine on "Altruism and Cooperation." His last book, *The Wars Within: Peoples and States in Conflict* (2003), treating issues of ethnic conflict within and across national borders, bristles with typical Williams sentences densely packed with a stream of synonyms communicating a sense of moral urgency. "The sensed threat takes many forms, both realistic and imagined," he wrote. "The common form of ethnic fear is expressed in the language of being overwhelmed, swamped, deluged, dominated, becoming helpless and permanently disadvantaged 'in our own land,' and ultimately being exterminated." From the vantage point of the twenty-first century, Robin M. Williams, Jr. remains well remembered for proving scholarship can meld social science of the highest grade with humanistic values and methods.

Elected 1967; Committees: Advisory on Election of Members 1979–83; Membership III 1978–84

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