

Culture



Regna DARNELL, *Edward Sapir: Linguist, Anthropologist, Humanist*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990. 480 pages, U.S. \$29.95 (cloth)

Dick Preston

Volume 10, numéro 1, 1990

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1080945ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1080945ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie

ISSN

0229-009X (imprimé)

2563-710X (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Preston, D. (1990). Compte rendu de [Regna DARNELL, *Edward Sapir: Linguist, Anthropologist, Humanist*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990. 480 pages, U.S. \$29.95 (cloth)]. *Culture*, 10(1), 112–113.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1080945ar>

Tous droits réservés © Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie, 1990

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

érudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

ity which promotes sovereignty through the expansion of armed excess, that "...the (Canadian) military is given a *carte blanche* accorded to no other department" (147) must astonish observers of the last twenty years of military spending. McMahon's assertion that "our society refuses to seriously question, consider or debate the social change inherent in new technologies" (238) can only leave the reader wondering what he reads.

In the end, *Arctic Twilight* tells us more about Kevin McMahon than about the Inuit. The immediacy of his anecdotes and the breadth of his reflections merit reading, but the prudent reader will want to leaven the heady effect of this book with more authoritative works such as Hugh Brody's *Living Arctic*.

Regna DARNELL, *Edward Sapir: Linguist, Anthropologist, Humanist*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990. 480 pages, U.S. \$29.95 (cloth).

by Dick Preston
McMaster University

Sapir is anthropology's one generally acknowledged genius. The scholarly events surrounding the centenary of his birth make clear his continuing value for us. Several collections of papers and the first of the 16 volumes of *The Collected Works of Edward Sapir* have already been published; others are at various stages of preparation. During our planning for the Centenary Conference in Ottawa, Regna Darnell commented that we would soon know more about Sapir than any other anthropologist. She was right, and she has made a major contribution to this fact.

This important book provides the many Sapir enthusiasts, both present and future, with the full context of Sapir's myriad activities. None of us knew even most of this context, and so the book serves to both broaden and correct our impressions. For this reason it is prerequisite for our various further efforts in understanding, extending, testing and otherwise working out the wonderfully wide scope of Sapir's examples and implications for our continuing intellectual inquiry.

Regna Darnell has put together a full record of what we know, positively, about Sapir's life, with special focus on his professional relationships. This is no mean feat, since it requires critical facility in the wide range of interests and activities that Sapir engaged in during a very full and intense life. Few

anthropologists have the intellectual breadth to undertake such a study; Darnell has specialist expertise in linguistics, ethnography, and institutional history, and has drawn on a wide range of personal communication, unpublished material, and her own years of critical thought on Sapir's work and place in the professionalization of anthropology.

The book, then, covers its very broad scope with a purpose and an organizational scheme and scholarly expository style that are very much Darnell's. Twenty-one chapters follow a life course sequence, with the modification of some parallel chapters covering different career interests that were worked out at approximately the same time.

His first 17 years are given a very brief but interesting overview. Somewhat more detail is given for his undergraduate and graduate years at Columbia, beginning with a heavy concentration on languages and a second sustained interest in music, apparently heading for a career in Germanic philology. Then, in his third year, he tried an introductory anthropology course, and simultaneously, began a two year graduate seminar with Boas, completing it and his MA at the end of the fourth year, with a summer's fieldwork on Wishram Chinook. Darnell gives us a review of his thesis, on one of Herder's essays. The fifth year was doctoral work in languages, and the summer was a return to Washington and fieldwork on Takelma for his dissertation. The sixth year was dedicated to broadening his general anthropological competence (with the exception of physical anthropology, which apparently never interested him).

At this point, Darnell begins the finely and fully detailed history of Sapir's professional career, which I can scarcely summarize in this review. The four page table of contents will give you a good sense of what is covered. Darnell has done a very successful job of writing a history of Sapir's professional career, and begins, and then leaves to others, the more subjective side of intellectual biography, and the further working out of the vistas he showed us. What is missing, for me, is the sense of his underlying optimism about the potential of excellent ideas to give humankind an understanding and amelioration of their world - which Sapir sustained through the early hopes and later discouragements of many unrealized or failed collaborations with other intellectually excellent people; a few during fifteen years in Ottawa, many more during six years at Chicago, and the final eight years at Yale.

After several others had thought the task too formidable, Regna Darnell took on a tough job, did a

great deal of research very well, and she has certainly earned our thanks. My two negative criticisms have to do with psychology and with style. Darnell seems to feel an outsider to psychological analysis and nuance. I dispute the awkward or imprecise use of psychological terms, e.g.: "more like a magician than a scientist (129); "lunatic fringes" (130); "infatuation with psychology" (140); "Freudian" unconscious (215). Also, I find some of the later discussion of personality psychiatry to be at once gratifyingly complete, yet less than convincing. and with regard to style, while I realize that the purpose of the book requires sustained attention to detail, the labourious researching that the writing required comes through too much to the reader, where a more free-flowing prose would have made a more felicitous reception and a clearer sense of development.

But I must emphasize that these are not major flaws, and it is to Darnell's great credit that we are given good coverage of the full range of Sapir's work. It might very well have been a much more constricted biography, had it been written by someone else. Especially in linguistics, Sapir developed and extended mature theory, method, and tech-

nique. Some linguists and anthropologists seem to wish that he had left it at that, and not essayed into the vagaries of the psychology of language and the psychology of culture. Certainly his music and poetry are not excellent, although they are indicative of his style of thought had it been written by someone else. The technology available to him for dealing with the "infinitely more complex and obscure" phenomena of psychology and art was very immature, and so he was not able to bring it to anywhere near the kind of resolution he could achieve with linguistics.

But if these tasks were much more difficult, it does not follow that they were less worthwhile, or that he was being profligate with abilities better saved for the easier science of languages. Typically, intellectuals of an essentially technological bent are rarely comfortable with essays into these domains. But Sapir's greatness of intellectual scope, intuitive facility, and humanist values got past these discomforts. Understanding the nature of consciousness, unconsciousness, and culture are huge challenges, and we owe Sapir for his ambition to address these challenges. And we owe Darnell for helping us to better understand Sapir.