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Recent Anthropology

By the late Professor Franz Boas

From time to time I have found it useful to re-examine the general principles which I have been following in my scientific work and to compare them with new tendencies which were springing up in our own and related sciences and which were modifying and extending both the field of our researches and the methods of investigation. It so happens that I have stated the results of such reexamination of principles at intervals of about ten years, beginning in 1888 with the acceptance of views generally held by ethnologists of that period. The last time I gave such a review was in 1932. I have been asked to give to-day a similar review of the problems and methods of anthropology as I see them.

Before the development of field research, planned for the investigation of specific, detailed problems, the endeavor of the field worker used to be primarily to obtain information, as complete as possible, regarding the types of bodily build, of linguistic expression and of other cultural features that set off one human society from others. In 1888, when I was charged by the British Association for the Advancement of Science with an investigation of the Indians of British Columbia, a summary report on the types and customs of the Indians of that province was the task entrusted to me. By necessity it resulted in a picture in which general impressions were combined in a standardized whole. Individual variations within the group had to be neglected. They were not considered as relevant. Furthermore, they can not be obtained by these methods, for they require long-continued personal relations between the observer and members of the group which he wishes to study.

It will perhaps be best to discuss the problems that