A History of Anthropological Theory
Paul A. Erickson and Liam D. Murphy, 2001

Review by Lori Brocksieker
Department of Anthropology
Wichita State University

A History of Anthropological Theory second edition and published in 2003 is a textbook for teaching anthropological theory at a senior-level undergraduate level course. This book was created by Professor Paul A. Erickson and his student Liam D. Murphy. They began collaborating on this book in 1997 at St. Mary’s University. Paul A. Erickson has been teaching at St. Mary’s University for the past 20 years. Liam D. Murphy is now a teaching professor himself and helped to put this book together. The first edition came out in 1998 along with a companion volume called Readings for a History of Anthropological Theory, published in 2001.

The purpose of this book was to come up with text that introduced “anthropological theory in a more straightforward and jargon-free prose (pg.13).” Erickson sought to deal with students complaints of complicated essays and readings and he yearned to make learning anthropological theory easier and more thorough for the student. He desired to give the student a more rounded and complete view of how anthropological theory began and has evolved throughout time. He wanted them to gain insight and learn from the early theories, as well as the current ones. He wished to accomplish this by not drowning the student in endless essays that for the most part, were written in a complicated and jargon-full text and which contained explanations and definitions in the way of endnotes and footnotes.

This text also includes a glossary of terms and sets of review questions to aid the students with the challenging vocabulary commonly used in anthropology. This volume also, introduces a new aspect of anthropology called applied anthropology. Erickson and Murphy then introduce the basic theories that make up the framework of anthropology. The next section is then divided up into different areas, the first being the early history of anthropology, which finds its roots in the Greco-Roman established framework of humanistic, religious, scientific, and intellectual outlooks that persevere even today. This text then moves into the Middle Ages, the Renaissance period, the Scientific Revolution, and the Enlightenment period. These periods in time will show the world wide spread of religion,
the explosion of the arts, religious based wars, establishment of trade routes, beginnings of colonialism and imperialism, advances in technology and further discoveries into the social sciences which gave anthropology a strong foundation. By the Enlightenment period many people tried to define human nature and attempted to pursue the “common ideals of reason, progress, and perfectibility, which declined with the French Revolution.” Throughout this section of the book it introduces us to early history and the key figures included in this section are diffusion, heliocentrism, evolutionism, creationism, Charles Darwin, Hebert Spencer, Adolf Bastian, Clark Wissler, G. Elliot Smith, William Perry, and William H. R. Rivers.

The next part of this book introduces many subfields, key people, and paramount techniques and paradigms that also shaped the future of anthropology. Many techniques or paradigms included in this text are archaeology, psychological anthropology, historical particularism, functionalism, and materialistic anthropology, (to name a few). Some key peoples described are Franz Boas, Robert Lowie, Alfred Kroeber, Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead, Emile Durkheim, Claude Levi-Strauss, and A. R. Radcliffe-Brown. The next section deals with the 20th Century and beyond. It shows how anthropology has grown in many different directions. The 20th Century will prove that anthropology can indeed go beyond the work of its forefathers. The 20th Century will show us new avenues in which to explore anthropology, through cognitive anthropology, cultural neo-evolution, cultural ecology, processual archaeology, biologized anthropology, behavioral genetics, symbolic anthropology and feminist anthropology. The 20th Century would give birth to such great anthropologist as Leslie White, Julian Steward, Marvin Harris, Sherwood Washburn, Edward Wilson, Michel Foucault, and Sherry Ortner. The 20th Century and beyond will only begin as a turning point for anthropology that has the strength of the past and the potential of the future to lead to unlimited possibilities.

This book successfully introduced many aspects and divisions of anthropology from the past to the present. It did make learning anthropological theory a little easier by dealing just with the key figures and paradigms that make up the heart of anthropology. Erickson and Murphy still encourage that students follow-up in reading the specific works of these key figures as they are very informative in laying the foundation of early anthropological theory. Despite a few criticisms on the content, Erickson’s and Murphy’s book is informative and worth reading. It accomplishes its purpose of introducing the history of anthropological theory in a more straightforward and easily read way.