

A politician's perspective of archaeology

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Typical Politician's Question! 'Does archaeology have a relevance in this modern world?' To which I respond with an emphatic 'Yes'. Human beings have a yearning to find out about our past. If it was not so, how could it be that for 50 years, ever-evolving television programmes on archaeology have commanded ever huger and ever more eager audiences? But there is a second consideration, among many arguments for archaeology, which I must mention. As an MP concerned with industry and economics, I have the strong anecdotal impression that employers have come to regard archaeology graduates as among their most desirable employees. Why? Because the study of archaeology creates a 'Can-do' attitude of mind, on top of a discipline that demands reasoning and deduction. It sticks in my mind that visiting one of my old lecturers, who had become Master of St John's, the late Sir Harry Hinsley, to ask for his advice about intelligence matters pertaining to the Falklands War, he observed: 'Of course, Glyn (Daniel)'s archaeology students are far more use than my (history) students'. Half-jesting and wholly in earnest, he had a point. University archaeology, and the inevitable field-work that goes with it, is excellent value for money. Of significant, albeit unquantifiable, value to the country is the goodwill engendered in cultural and international relations by British archaeological teams digging abroad — provided they are not Carter/Schliemann-like trophy hunters. Their chief concern must be the context in which artefacts are found, and *their* treasure the addition to scholarship that any finds produce. Sensitive archaeologists can be exceedingly effective diplomats!

The editor of *ANTIQUITY* asked me for 3000 words on 'What archaeology means to you'. I can but respond with reflections and experiences that will seem to many readers to be overly personal and reliant on the good fortune of the opportunities for travel that come to a politician, and of a wife who was a Member of the

Historic Buildings Council, the Ancient Monuments Board, the Royal Fine Art Commission, and is currently Chairman of the Royal Commission on the Historical and Ancient Monuments of Scotland.

In my 70th year, I realize that a layman's appraisal of a great archaeological site is partly determined by the age and stage in life that it was visited and by the circumstances in which the visit took place. In January 1964, on our honeymoon, I tumbled to something else — that leaders of countries have an instant soft spot for a foreign politician who has taken an interest in the ancient history of their country. On my last night in Cairo, albeit I had made the request to see him, I was summoned at midnight to rise from my hotel bed, and driven to President Nasser's private residence. It was clear that a major reason for bothering to see a 29-year-old, newly-elected British MP, only seven years after the Suez conflict, lay in his observation that any couple who made Abu Simbel the ultimate destination of their honeymoon must have a respect for Egypt. I have found that interest in their ancient past is a passport to the present rulers of many lands.

My interest, I suppose, was kindled by the visit to our house in Scotland (supposedly built on a Pictish site) by a friend of my parents, a bushy-faced, hairy man in a huge sombrero hat, who, in his Australian twang, was the most enthralling story-teller a seven-year-old could imagine: Professor Gordon Childe.

It was my mother who suggested to the second archaeologist of my childhood that he should dig at a strange mound in the Bathgate Hills in West Lothian which, according to her family tradition, was a Pictish hill beacon-fort. The career of the then young Stuart Piggott took off, when he excavated Cairn Papple, now judged by Historic Scotland to be the most important Bronze Age site on the Scottish mainland.

My dad, too, had a passionate concern with the supreme importance of learning what could

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be learned about our ancestors before the destruction of a site, and of perceiving that which ought to be preserved. As a young man, and military secretary to Sir William Willcocks, the engineer who dammed the Tigris and the Euphrates and was later to build the first Aswan dam, he 'siphoned off' some money to help his archaeologist friend Leonard Woolley excavate Ur of the Chaldees. (For this initiative he won the approval of the great Pro-Consul, Sir Percy Cox, and his formidable Secretary Gertrude Bell, who appointed him to their staff, on account of their own immense interest in the ancient peoples of Sumer and Mesopotamia.) My dad took me to see Woolley in London, some quarter of a century later.

So the reader will gather that I was born with an archaeological spoon in my mouth. Good fortune continued. I went to a school, 1945–50, which immediately post-war was a very adult, serious place. I became, at 13, Joint Secretary of the Eton College Junior Archaeological Society. The other 13-year-old secretary was my life-long friend-to-be of 57 years, S.L. Egerton, King's Scholar. As Sir Stephen Egerton, he was to be Ambassador in Baghdad, Riyadh and Rome, and is currently President of the Society for Libyan Studies. I was lucky to be educated in an environment where some masters such as A.K. Wickham, C.R.N. Routh and R.C. Martineau knew a great deal about archaeology, and where boys did not think it odd that fellow-pupils should avidly interest themselves in archaeological visits to Sutton Hoo and museums. Twelve-year old Richard Layard 'read us a paper' on Nineveh. Precocious, without schoolboy inhibitions, let alone ribaldry!

This interest in archaeology, and what has now come to be known as 'Rescue Archaeology', was quickened by an incident during my National Service as a trooper tank-crew in what was then the Royal Scots Greys on Lüneburger Heide. It was appallingly muddy. Rain had been lashing down for days. The tracks of my Centurion tank were churning up the ground. Suddenly we half lopsided into a hole. A combination of semi-dressed stone and bones suggested ancient origins. My squadron-commander, Major Allen, mentioned the incident to the Commanding Officer, Lt. Colonel Douglas Stewart, DSO, MC, later to be an equestrian gold medallist at the Helsinki Olympic Games, a man of wide interests. He contacted the German authorities.

Within a couple of hours, a very serious official — I can remember his gold-coloured rimmed spectacles, and intense expression — was earnestly asking us exactly what we had seen when the tank plummeted. This was my first taste of rescue archaeology. For 50 years I have carried with me the value of knowledge of the circumstances of what that Land-Official — I think his name was Meyer Landrut — did by example. Not everything of archaeological interest can be saved. I would want to know the circumstances in detail, of why anything which can be recorded, is not recorded.

In my first year at Cambridge, because of illness among dons, King's College arranged that half-a-dozen of us should be supervised in Ancient History by the septuagenarian Professor Sir Frank Adcock, one of the considerable classical scholars of the age — or of any age. I soon thought that the old pedant, who invited one or two of us to go on afternoon walks with him, was worth a guinea-a-minute. Adcock's enthusiasm for serious archaeological deduction was matched only by his scorching contempt for Dr Glyn Daniel, of St John's, 'a bounder who exploits television'. Actually, I stick to the view that Glyn Daniel, and my parent's friend from the Persian Gulf in the 1930s, Sir Mortimer Wheeler, educated a whole generation of us by their skilful explanation of artefacts which they could borrow for the studio, and which most people would never have known to exist. Though I did not read Anthropology — I did Part I History and then Part II of the Economics Tripos — the most potent spell in college for those interested in antiquity was Professor Meyer Fortes. I have come to share his belief that ethnic artefacts ought to be returned to the lands from which they came, provided there is reasonable expectation that they can properly be preserved. However, I understand the counter-argument that more people will appreciate cultural treasures in the great collections of Berlin, London, Los Angeles, New York and Paris.

One of the most valuable parts of a valuable year at Moray House College of Education in Edinburgh were the Saturdays working as a 'labourer' on a dig being conducted at Cramond Roman Fort by the Head of the History department, Alan Rae and his wife Vi. Albeit amateurs, they instilled into volunteer students like me a sense of meticulous care, and archaeological discipline and method.

As a teacher at Bo'ness Academy, a comprehensive school on the Forth, I would like to think that I instilled the rudiments of archaeology into pupils. Certainly, I knew at first hand that lessons in archaeology appealed to pupils, not least those of a non-academic disposition. It appears to me now — I am open to correction — that most history teachers who could interestingly and usefully have digressed into archaeology are inhibited from doing so by an over-rigorous, curriculum-based examination system. During four happy years teaching at the mining town on the Forth, I managed over successive Christmas and New Year holidays to go to Egypt, Lebanon and West Africa. In Luxor, by chance, I was befriended by Tor Gjesdal and his wife, Norwegian officials of the United Nations, responsible for organizing the feasibility studies of raising the vast statues of Ramesses II and his Queen above the waters of the to-be-created Lake Nasser. Abu Simbel is perhaps the greatest triumph to date for Rescue Archaeology.

Lebanon was a happier place in 1957 than for the rest of the century. Friends working for the American University of Beirut, then no inconsiderable centre of archaeological expertise, took me to Baalbek. The temple of Bacchus, flood-lit, must be one of the most evocative of the legacies of the Roman Empire. If, by good fortune, Baalbek has escaped the ravages of recent wars, one fears that lack of maintenance may have taken a toll.

Still at Bo'ness, out of the blue, a then 12-year-old pupil came up to me, and asked if I would like to spend Christmas with his Daddy. Since his Daddy, David Sneddon, and his erstwhile mineworker colleague, Bryce Currie, had metamorphosed into gold dredgers at Bremang in the Ashanti rain-forest of Ghana, I jumped at the invitation. In the steaming jungle, a wood-based civilization would hardly provide archaeological remains in an accepted sense — but a visit to the home of the young Denkirahene, who wanted to play table-tennis with me after the formalities of paying respects to the chief, allowed me to see the artefacts of the Denkira tribe, which had been handed down since time immemorial. Perhaps this experience was a salutary reminder that peoples whose climate and environment are unfavourable to conservation can also have a history in antiquity.

Seconded in 1962 from the West Lothian Education Authority to BI's [British India Steam

Navigation Company] as a Director of Studies on the ship-school *Dunera*, part of my responsibility was to show slides of places pupils were likely to visit on daily shore excursions. When the ship docked at Piraeus, the Acropolis and the Parthenon lent themselves to all ages and abilities. On voyages which included Naples in the itinerary, Pompeii was a huge success — but, interestingly, surpassed by Herculaneum for some of the gifted 16–17-year-olds. I wondered why this was so. Perhaps precisely because it was less packaged, and therefore rendered a more authentic ambience of life a couple of millennia ago.

Slightly to my chagrin, the least enchanting of the Mediterranean sites for pupils was Knossos, excavated by my father's friend and distant kinsman, Sir Arthur Evans. Even the young could sense how Evans could raise doubts among the cognoscenti. In 2001, my wife and I were enchanted by Cretan civilization, as depicted in the museum at Iraklion, and the towering site of Phaestos, on the south coast of the island.

Determined to show my bride, Kathleen Wheatley, Abu Simbel before it was reconstructed, we went on honeymoon to Egypt. Shortly before he died, tragically prematurely, I had attended a lecture by the Provost of King's, Professor Stephen Glanville, Professor of Egyptology in Cambridge, in which he warned of the deterioration of super-famous sites. Our breathing cannot have helped the fabric of the magical tomb of Seti I or the exquisite resting-place of Princess Ti and sundry nobles. Our fears were confirmed by the distinguished Arabist, Sir Harold Beeley, then in his second term in Cairo, who taught us the life-long belief that masses of visitors must not be allowed to destroy that which they come to see in the first place. Trying to jump from one pillar to another of the Hypostyle Hall in Karnak, Kathleen slipped and incurred an ugly bruise; Pharaoh must have disapproved of honeymooners; and my father-in-law, John Wheatley, who sat in the High Court of Scotland for a third of a century, wondered whether his son-in-law would turn out to be a wife-beater!

In 1965, Kathleen and I went to Indonesia, journeying across Java to Jakarta to see the Borobudur, in my opinion the greatest single structure by an ancient people that I have ever seen, and the Prabanan, unworldly beautiful

by moonlight. Partly because he heard of our initiative, President Sukarno invited us to breakfast with him at the Merekeka Palace on our return to Jakarta, and gave us a personally conducted tour of the treasures. Whatever other shortcomings he may have had, Sukarno's knowledge of the ancient Javanese was encyclopedic.

Fortunate are those who visited Cambodia before the troubles that were ignited by the war in Vietnam, and the awfulness of Pol Pot. Whether freeing Angkor Wat and the intricate stone lacework of Bantrei Shrei from the pervasive forest constitutes 'archaeology' is open to question. War not only ravages but opens great edifices to robbers and trophy-hunters. Angkor surely belongs not only to the Khmer people, but to the wider world.

For years, Burma has been a closed society. As the personal guests, in the more relaxed times, of General Ne Win and his first wife, Katie, who died young, we were flown to the Temples of Pagan in mid Burma by the General's pilot, Captain Mohein. A vast effort, utterly beyond the resources of modern Burma, is required to prevent this huge cluster of amazing structures from crumbling into irrevocable disrepair. Rangoon's Schwedagong glinting in gold, seen by the occasional tourist, remains a great icon of the Buddhist world.

In 1998, Kathleen and I went with the British Museum Travel Company to Iran on a visit led by Dr Sheila Canby, then deputy keeper of the Western Asiatic Department of the British Museum, and Rafael Marinello. Persepolis is suffering. In the horrendous eight-year war between Iran and Iraq, oil refineries were hastily moved from the northwest of Iran near to the Iraq border, to sites between Isfahan and Shiraz. Pollution threatens even the famous sculptures of all the peoples 'incorporated' into Cyrus' empire.

Whatever is said of Saddam, and whatever his motives, in 1994 one of the most urgent tasks he gave the Iraqis was to repair the Great Mosque of the Shia at Kerbala, a scene of sinister happenings in the 1990s and of unquenchable beauty. I saw the craftsmen lovingly at work, with tools hardly distinguishable from those of their ancestors, 600 years earlier. The significance of respecting a nation's loved monuments is usually apparent to those like Saddam who succeed in holding onto power for lengthy periods of time.

A life-long interest in Latin America has given me an enviable opportunity to get to know something of the ancient Americans. My introduction was a visit to our military units in deepest Belize. From the cemetery full of fever-stricken Scots names of the 18th century I went to Balmopan and realized how wise in health matters the local Maya were not to live on the lethally clammy coast. The small-scale, unexcavated Maya monuments in the jungle intrigued even the most hardened soldiers. In 1978, I was one of the delegates at the European Parliament/Latin America conference in Mexico City. Even seasoned politicians found the Aztec past at Tenochtitlan, yes, sinister. On the other hand, those MEPs [Members of the European Parliament] who opted to go to the Yucatan found the Mayas '*énormément sympathique*'. Colette Flesch, then Mayor of Luxembourg City, and I took a taxi to arrive at Chichen-Itza at dawn, so we could return to the then tiny town of Cancun in time for a 9.30 a.m. start to the conference. Dawn is the right time to pay respects to the Mayas! And it was a civilization of considerable sporting facilities!

I have twice been to Peru — in 1984 to see Belaunde Terry, the President, and Manuel Ulloa, Prime Minister from 1982, at the time of the Peruvian peace proposals during the Falklands War; and subsequently in 1999 as Leader of the Inter-parliamentary Union Delegation. I record that at our planning meeting, I resisted the temptation to go to Cuzco and Macchu Picchu and opted for the alternative, Izuitos, on the Amazon. I make the point so that readers of ANTIQUITY do not jump to the conclusion that official parliamentary visits are simply a vehicle for archaeological enjoyment at the tax-payers' expense. A year later, in 2000, I was asked by Madam Speaker Boothroyd to lead the IPU delegation to Bolivia. Ambassador Graham Minter took us to the extraordinary site at Titicaca, extraordinary above all for the scale of the civilization. If the museum of Inca Gold in Lima is one of the best laid-out for artefacts, if the museum of anthropology and ethnology in Mexico City is a place of rivetting interest, the museum of Pre-Colombian Art in La Paz is as rivettingly interesting as it is under-financed.

I have a general observation. If an ill-endowed museum in a poor country like Bolivia, or a

war-torn country like Iraq, is part of the world's heritage, then some mechanism ought to be found whereby the world can help with finances. How can we say to the government of Bolivia that they ought to earmark some resources for museums, when there are so many other desperate needs?

These reflections are penned amidst what little remains of ancient Carthage. Scipio Africanus' *'Carthago delenda est'* and many successors certainly did their best, and all too effectively. But in Tunis there is one of the greatest collections of the world — the mosaics in the Bardo museum. My desire to come to Tunisia was ignited by two visits, the first in 1990, and the second in March 2001, when I led the first Inter-Parliamentary Union visit to Sabatha, in Libya, and what is surely the greatest of all sites of Ancient Rome — Leptis Magna — a view shared by John Wilkes, Professor of the History of the Roman Provinces in the University of Lon-

don, and a delightful travelling companion, when I went as a 'paying spouse' on the annual visitations of the Ancient Monuments Board in Scotland, of which Wilkes was a Member.

I was told by Colonel Gaddaffi and his ministers that Libya had neither the need nor the desire to open up the largest single coastline in the Mediterranean to mass tourism. They were unashamedly interested in specialist tourism. I suspect that the greatest challenge in world archaeology may lie in co-operation with the Libyans, in the restoration of their many world-class sites. To find oneself almost alone in Leptis Magna, with noise emanating mainly from the resident bird population was selfishly wonderful.

Whither archaeology?

As a discipline, archaeology lies between the arts and the sciences, and is perhaps the best discipline of all to engender flexibility of the mind. What could be more valuable in the 21st century?

Anyone for writing?

PETER KEMMIS BETTY*

'The universal interest in the past is perfectly natural. It is the interest in life itself. There was a time when archaeology was voted a dull subject, fit only for dry-as-dusts; yet it was not the subject that was dull, but its exponents. Those days are over.'

Thus O.G.S. Crawford in his Editorial Notes for the very first number of *ANTIQUITY* 75 years ago. However admirable, this missionary zeal is far from universal among present-day archaeologists; moreover, the present-day funding of archaeology, though lavish compared with Crawford's day, is in danger of quenching the missionary flame even when it exists. Crawford was, of course, thinking primarily of journal articles as the medium for accessible communication; to these could be added not only books and newspapers but, today, TV and the internet. However, it is the success or otherwise of the book in making archaeology exciting on which I wish to concentrate, as it is only through book publishing that I have had serious contact with the world of archaeology. To be even more spe-

cific, since I have been involved, one way or another, in publishing archaeological books for 30 years, I shall be confining myself to my own direct experience of the opportunities and difficulties involved.

It is only in the last 15 years of this period that I have become increasingly convinced of the need for more widely accessible books — and correspondingly concerned about the difficulty in commissioning appropriate authors. So what follows is, from one perspective, a shameless appeal to archaeologists who share Crawford's vision to make my life as a publisher easier. However, at the same time I do believe that a response to this appeal would be in the interest of British archaeology as a whole.

To explain this self-serving assertion I fear I need to indulge in a little ancient history. Despite reading Classics at Cambridge my interest in archaeology did not begin until some 10 years later. At that time I was employed as an editor at B.T. Batsford, largely working on a

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